

Title: A Song In Time of Revolution

Summary: AU of HBP, HPDM slash. Revolution is never an easy choice—and worse when you're trying to respect the free will of everyone, wizard and magical creature alike. Prophecy and politics and the Ministry...Harry doesn't need any more complications.

Notes: This is the sixth story in what I call the Sacrifices Arc, following Wind That Shakes the Seas and Stars. By now, it's its own full-blown alternate universe, with Slytherin!Harry, Harry and Draco in an established relationship, and Voldemort temporarily so badly wounded that he can't fight, and you're probably not going to understand the story if you try to start reading here.

Also, this is an extremely long story. The current outline is 99 numbered chapters, with 25 unnumbered ones (Intermissions and Interludes). I do update every day most of the time, but it's going to take three months to complete even so. Be warned if you don't like long serials.

Warnings: Language, violence, gore, torture, sex, discussion of past rape and child abuse, slash and het and saffic (femmeslash) in varying degrees of explicitness, tons of politics, multiple character deaths. Also, there are spoilers for Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince in this story. I've been using background information from the book in the other stories, but this is the one where it really takes center stage. If you haven't read HBP and don't want to be spoiled for it, then please don't read this.

Archiving: I archive at Fanfiction, Skyehawke, and on my LiveJournal, and send update notices through my Yahoo!Group (links for all of these, as well as a site with .doc and .PDF files of the stories, can be found in my Fanfiction profile). The easiest way to get in touch with me is my e-mail or my LJ.

And here we go. Thanks for coming all this way with me.

A Song In Time of Revolution

Chapter One: Haunted, Helped, Dreaming

“And how does it taste?”

Harry kept his gaze resolutely on the pear, to keep his face from burning. When he wasn't thinking about how food tasted to him, he thought, it felt much more natural. He could enjoy sweetness, saltiness, and bitterness without pause. But now Vera was encouraging him to overcome the training his mother had given him to resist and even be uncomfortable with things that felt good, and, well, it included things like this.

Harry bit into the pear, and nodded. The fruit was incredibly cold and sweet, as was almost all the fruit in the Sanctuary. “Good,” he said.

“How good?”

“I don't know,” Harry snapped before he could stop himself. “I don't have a lot of experience measuring this, you know.”

He tried to apologize after that, but Vera waved off the words and leaned back in her chair, looking pleased. She was a small, round woman with quiet brown eyes that saw too much. Harry usually felt more comfortable with her than he did now. He had never yet seen Vera lose her temper for more than a moment, though, no matter what he did.

They were sitting in the usual room where he came to speak with Vera, a high place with open windows which the light and the wind were free to wander through. Vera sat with her back to the light, outlining her in a thick gold-white halo. Harry had to squint to watch her nod. “It is good that you no longer put such a guard on your tongue and think about what you say before you say it,” she told him. “You are becoming less conscious and more spontaneous.”

“And that's a good thing?” Harry raised his eyebrows. His magic brewed and buzzed around him when he did it, and he calmed it with a touch. The time spent in the Sanctuary was about lowering barriers he didn't even know he had, seemingly, and some of those had included barriers on his magic. Harry still wasn't sure how he felt about that. “I do have to keep an eye on how I use my power,

whether or not I'm respecting the free choices of my allies, what I do with Draco—“

Vera chuckled, interrupting him. “And if your whole life is a stiff dance,” she said, “then you will lose yourself to it in the end. Many different paces, walk and waltz and pavane, are better for living.”

Harry nodded, and then glared at the pear in his hand again. Most of what Vera said seemed obvious. Hell, most of what Draco and Snape said seemed obvious. But until they said it, formed it in words and presented it to him, he seemed unable to think of those points for himself.

He wished ferociously for a moment that he was normal, and looked up to find Vera staring at him.

“Do you wish to stop for today, Harry?” Vera’s voice was perfectly understanding, perfectly gentle—the kind of tone that usually just goaded Harry into trying harder. “I understand that you still think of the taste of food as a small thing, and indeed, I have seen you enjoying it on your own. There are other things we could talk about, regarding this kind of training.”

All of which would make me blush, Harry thought, and none of which I’m comfortable talking about with you. He shook his head and laid the pear on a table. “Can we talk about something else altogether?” he asked.

“Of course,” said Vera. She hesitated, one of the few times Harry had seen her do so. That put him on edge even before she said, “The deepest wound in your soul at the moment concerns the twelve children you had to kill out of mercy. You have not yet spoken about it, and you have been here for a week. Will you talk with me about that?”

Harry steeled himself. “Yes, I will,” he said. Every step on this path is an uphill one, isn’t it? But he was sick of just covering up the wounds and hoping nothing ripped them wide open before time had a chance to soften the memory of how he’d earned them. He was part of a war, and a prophecy, and a political alliance, and that meant there would

always be something to rip open the wounds before they healed. He'd come here of his own free will, he reminded himself for the thousandth time, and he was going to heal, and fuck everything that got in his way.

Including himself.

Vera blinked at his agreement, but then leaned back, sheening her face with the sunlight again. "Good," she said. "I understand that you still feel you could have done something else. What else could you have done?"

Harry closed his eyes. "I don't know."

That truly bothered him, far more than Vera's insistence on concentrating on the taste of food or having him sit in warm baths so that he could endure pleasant feelings without squirming. He had revived the memory in his dreams and while wandering the terraces and rooms of the Sanctuary. The main factor that had doomed him while Voldemort held a dozen Hogwarts students under a Life-Web, able to torture or kill them at will, and challenged Harry to come down and surrender his life to save them, was, Harry had thought, time. He had known the students before him were suffering, and the students behind him had been suffering, too. If he had had more time, he could have done something, found some other solution than stopping those children's hearts with a spell before Voldemort could notice.

But no other solution would occur to him, except yielding himself, and that would have lost them the war, at least according to people whom Harry trusted. And Harry piled more worry on top of that. What if there was something simple and obvious he was missing, something anyone else would have done, and he kept ignoring the option because that would mean blaming himself? He just didn't want to be guilty, in that case. He had to keep track of what he did, what self-justifications he made to himself. Part of it was the vates path he trod, trying to respect the free will of everyone in existence, but an even larger part of it was his own fear of ending up like Dumbledore and Voldemort. Let him once excuse his own guilt, and what else would he excuse, what sacrifices would he say were necessary, what corruption would he let into his soul? He had to distrust himself.

“Harry?”

Harry blinked his eyes open in startlement. Vera had leaned forward and put one hand on his knee.

“Your thoughts coil on each other like serpents,” she said, “and this guilt is twined with so many others in your soul that I cannot See it clearly. Will you explain it in words for me?”

Haltingly, Harry licked his lips, tried to dismiss thoughts of sounding stupid or guilty or self-obsessed, and said, “I—ma’am—”

“Call me Vera, Harry.” She smiled, and if Harry had ever met one of his grandmothers, he assumed she would have looked like this. “You retreat into formality when you’re upset. I would rather that you be as honest with me as possible.”

Harry inclined his head, and then had to reflect that that was a formal movement, too, not just a nod. He swallowed and said, “I thought, once I had time and peace, that I would know exactly what I should have done instead of the mercy killing.” Vera nodded encouragingly when he paused, and Harry plunged forward. “But I still can’t see anything else I could have done. What am I ignoring? Am I so afraid of facing up to my crime that I’m unconsciously exonerating myself? And what does it mean if I am? Is the British wizarding world going to have to face another Dark Lord before I’m done, because I’m sliding down the path to self-justification and I don’t even realize it?”

Vera observed him in intense silence for a moment. Harry waited, his nerves humming. His right hand smoothed over and over the scarred stump of his left wrist.

And that was a problem, too. He had decided that, perhaps, it was worthwhile researching the Dark curses Bellatrix had used to keep him from getting another hand. Maybe. But his newborn conviction had provoked a too-pleased reaction from Draco, as well as questions about why Harry wasn’t sure, and Harry had had to shrug and shake his head.

He hated being uncertain. It was the thing he missed the most about the days when he'd just been able to exist under his training and think of his brother as the center of his universe. Everything was so simple. There were so many things Harry knew how to do, and if something unexpected did happen, like his Sorting into Slytherin, then he had other vows and promises and certainties to fall back on.

Now, half the time, it seemed he stood on the edge of a abyss and looked down into it, and every choice he made could have devastating consequences for other people, and he didn't know which would be less devastating, to leap or stand.

"You have not blamed the war," said Vera.

Harry blinked. Usually, he was better about tracing the course of the Seer's thoughts, but he had missed the connection she made this time. "What?"

"You have not said that you had no other choice to do this, because it was war." Vera curled so that her legs were beneath her in the chair, her head bobbing up and down like a wren's pecking at seed. Her eyes never moved from Harry's face.

Harry blinked again. "Of course not. Why would I? Other people manage to get through wars without mercy-killing a dozen children." He shuddered a bit, shaken by his own deep bitterness, and the grief underneath, like black water beneath a layer of ice. Now that he'd started on this, though, he couldn't seem to stop. "Even Dumbledore didn't have to do that. The worst he did was set children free who'd been crucified and suffering for days. And he was forced into that. It was Voldemort's doing."

"And this was not?" Vera tilted her head to fix him with one bright, bird-like eye.

Harry hissed under his breath and shuffled one foot back and forth. "I—well, it was Voldemort who set the Life-Web, obviously."

"And?" Vera prompted, voice low.

“But it was me who made the decision,” said Harry. “It’s not as though Voldemort told me that I had to kill those children myself or he would torture them. He promised that they would live if I went down to him.”

“Did you trust him?”

“Of course not,” said Harry, mind calling up images of Snape lying with his right leg unwound into pieces on the floor of the Chamber of Secrets, of helpless Muggles lured into the water by sirens, of Voldemort, still looking like a deformed child, biting a piece of flesh out of his chest for the resurrection ritual. “But that didn’t matter, did it? I wasn’t backed into a corner. I still didn’t make the choice he gave me.”

He stopped, with those words ringing in his ears, and blinked.

“Yes,” said Vera softly. “And that, I believe, is the difference between you and Dumbledore, Harry, and certainly between you and You-Know-Who. If you were already seeking some way to free yourself from guilt, by saying it was entirely the war’s fault and people make horrible decisions in war, or by claiming that it was Voldemort who forced you into that precise choice, I would worry more. But you acknowledge your own role in the decision. You acknowledge that you do not believe Voldemort would have freed them, or that your giving your own life up to him would have made the slightest bit of difference. You chose a path he did not dictate. And you know it. That is a strength, Harry, not a weakness.”

Harry blinked some more. He could feel a weight on his shoulders and his heart easing, a bit. He just wasn’t sure if he believed in it yet. “Oh,” he said softly.

“Now,” said Vera, “perhaps you will, someday, think of another path you could have taken. And you will preserve that path into the future, and if you ever find yourself in such a situation again—“

“Which I will, knowing Voldemort,” Harry muttered. He’d cut a hole in the Dark Lord’s magical core, so he constantly lost his power whenever he tried to use it, but Harry expected Voldemort to find

some way to get around that eventually. At least it had won him a summer.

Vera continued undaunted. "Then you will know what to do." She clasped her hands and beamed at Harry. "And I think that's enough for today. You look as if someone's hit you on the head with a rock." She chuckled. "Go find your Malfoy. I think Nina is done with him for the day, as well."

Harry nodded, murmured, "Thank you," and left the room. Just outside the door was a broad, shallow stone step filled with sunlight. Argutus was basking there, fully six feet of shimmering, mirror-colored snake. Harry shaded his eyes against the reflection of the sun from his scales and shook his head.

"I can smell your doubt." Argutus's voice was bright, and his tongue flickered out as he lifted his head to look at Harry. "What is it this time? Can you not believe how beautiful I am, or how lucky you are that I chose you to be my friend, instead of someone else?"

"Neither," said Harry in Parseltongue, stooping to offer his left arm to Argutus. The Omen snake wound up his arm, around his shoulders, neck, and waist, and stopped when his head was tucked into the crook of Harry's collarbone. Harry stroked his scales as he walked up towards the small house where Draco usually stayed. "Sometimes, I am stunned that you're here with me at all, or that I'm here. I wake up and expect to find myself in Hogwarts, or a dungeon where Voldemort keeps his prisoners, and that the Sanctuary is a dream."

"If we were in dungeons," Argutus disagreed, "I would have found a way out by now, reflecting hidden doors in my scales." His body writhed and shifted, nearly blinding Harry for a moment. Harry stumbled on the next step down and reoriented himself to which direction was blue sky and which sprawling roofs of every conceivable color and design.

"I'm sure you would have," he said. "Just don't try to demonstrate it to me while we're walking."

“Why do humans walk?” Argutus demanded abruptly. “Why did you grow legs?”

“We didn’t grow legs,” Harry said patiently, as he rounded a corner and jogged into the cool darkness of the antechamber to Draco’s room. “You lost them.”

A startled pause, and Argutus said, “That’s not what the room says.”

“What room?” Harry knocked on Draco’s door, and Nina, Draco’s Seer, opened it a moment later, giving him a delighted smile.

“Draco was just about to send me to fetch you, Harry,” she said. “If you’ll come in?”

Harry nodded, and listened to Argutus’s reply as he shifted past the slender woman. “There is a room that speaks of snake magic, which must still exist somewhere in the world, or there would not be a room that talks about it. It says that snakes were the original creatures in the world. Everyone else comes from us. You grew legs, and you grew skins that you never shed. Why?”

“Ask your room, as I’m sure I don’t know,” Harry muttered, and then looked up at Draco. He was startled to find him out of bed, and dressed in formal wizarding robes for the first time since he’d possessed Voldemort during the final battle.

“Draco?” he asked tentatively.

Draco had not expected to hear such concern in Harry’s voice, and some of his pride melted into annoyance.

“Harry?” he echoed the same way, his eyes wide and his mouth round, and saw Nina smile over Harry’s shoulder as she shut the door behind her. Draco resisted the urge to smile in return, since Harry would think it was at him. Nina was learning him well in the last few days, especially since Draco could talk to her about Harry as he could no one else, and she would know Draco wanted to be alone with his boyfriend.

Harry frowned. "You were wounded badly," he said, tugging his hand through his hair. "And I didn't know how much progress you'd made in healing the taint." They hadn't seen each other at all yesterday; Draco had slept after an exhausting talk with Nina the day before, and Harry had apparently spent most of the time wandering the gardens with Vera, or sitting in a warm bath and attempting to adjust to the sensation.

"I no longer need to lie in a bed," said Draco. "And there's something we need to talk about, Harry."

Harry tilted his head. "Really."

The word wasn't the most inviting invitation ever extended, but Draco forged ahead. The Sanctuary's air tended to wear away at emotional barriers. That was part of the reason Harry's irritation and worry crackled just under the surface, and part of the reason Draco was surer of getting an honest answer when he asked his questions. "Yes. You froze when Voldemort threatened me in the Midsummer battle. You couldn't do anything about the sirens, even though you managed to kill those children he held under the Life-Web when his Death Eaters were killing other students—and I don't really think the sirens were less dangerous than the Death Eaters. I want to know what was so different about me."

"You just want me to gratify your vanity," Harry replied, relaxing. "And that's easy enough. I love you, Draco, and you are more important to me than most other people. Even masses of people." He rolled his eyes. "Happy?"

"Not at all," said Draco. He had thought this might happen. Harry was misunderstanding the point of his question. "What happens if someone else threatens me in battle like that?"

Ah-ha. He sees it now. Harry had tensed. Then he whirled away and went to look out Draco's window. Draco wondered if he had noticed yet that every mural and tapestry on the walls portrayed a wizard with white-blond hair achieving some triumph or receiving some honor. The Seers had chosen well when they gave Draco this room. Harry,

of course, tended not to appreciate art until someone ordered him to appreciate it.

Draco didn't think he had any idea how beautiful he looked, either, staring down at the waterfall that cascaded away next to Draco's house, his green eyes narrowed against the sunlight, his arms folded and his back tense enough to break a wall.

"Then I'll freeze again, I suppose."

Draco shook his head and moved closer to Harry's back. "Not good enough, Harry. You're going to be a leader most of the time, if only because you'll be the most powerful wizard in almost any battle. And we can't afford to have our most powerful wizard freeze because Karkaroff grabs me—"

"Karkaroff is dead."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Or Walden Macnair—"

"He's dead, too." Harry glanced back at him over his shoulder. "You told me you possessed him and forced him to lead some of the other Death Eaters into a trap yourself."

Draco snarled. "Or Voldemort, Harry. If he grabs me, you can't freeze. And no, I am not going to stay behind while you go into battle," he added, when he saw Harry opening his mouth to suggest something.

Harry blinked. "I would never ask you to, Draco."

"Oh." Draco had to admit that he might have let his own freed emotions get the better of him there. "Sorry."

Harry nodded and turned, putting his back to the window and slouching so that his shoulders brushed the stone. Draco hid his delight. There was a point in his life when Harry would never have shown even this degree of relaxation. His gaze on Draco was pensive as he stroked his snake's head. "It's all right. I might feel better if you'd stay safe, but you wouldn't. And it's your choice to fight. And I have to admit," Harry went on, a faint smile appearing on his lips for

the first time, “I like the idea of us fighting side by side like comrades, instead of a soldier out on the lines and a healer waiting behind them. I still stand by what I said after your possession of Voldemort. You were magnificent in that battle, Draco.”

His gaze was deep and warm, and Draco wished he could bask in it without saying something to snap the mood. “Thank you,” he murmured. “But what about if someone does threaten me, Harry? Can you learn to live with it, to do something besides freeze?”

Silence, and Harry took his hand away from Argutus and clenched it into a fist. Then he sighed.

“I’m a leader,” he said, “and that’s not going to change. And you’ll be fighting beside me, and that’s not going to change, either. I’ll have to learn to live with it, won’t I?”

Draco felt a burst of affection and pride and—he didn’t know what other emotions were in there, just that they were there. He put out his hand, and Harry stepped across the room to clasp it. “Together, then,” he said.

“In all things,” said Harry, and held his eyes, and if he might still flinch away from him when he felt too good, his face showed nothing but sincerity now.

Draco grinned at him, and then Harry asked, “How did Nina help you remove Voldemort’s taint on your mind?” and they were past the first obstacle that Draco had felt lying between them.

There were others, of course. He wondered, even as he talked about Nina telling him clearly what impulses she saw in Draco that were not his own, and what parts of his soul looked like his own to her and which weren’t, if Harry was keeping count of the time. They’d been in the Sanctuary a week, and it was the early part of July. Harry’s birthday was coming up at the end of the month, and so was the second ritual of the thirteen in their three-year courting dance.

Draco fully intended to not only have Harry thinking of him and him alone on that night, which had happened on Walpurgis, but to have Harry share in more pleasure than he had managed then.

Snape smoothly conjured wooden targets and just as smoothly used his wandless magic to destroy them. He hadn't had any trouble using it since they arrived in the Sanctuary. The air, the atmosphere, the very light here ate away his defenses and made his emotions boil to the surface.

Two wooden, human-shaped targets appeared. The next moment, both exploded into splinters, and his magic curved around the room, a fanged beast on a leash.

He had dreamed last night. The Seers were leaving him alone, as he had demanded, but, as they had promised, dreams came hunting him in their place. Snape had relived, again, the day that he finished brewing a potion that would allow him to see his own soul, and drank it.

Bang, bang, and two more targets were no more. Snape paced to the other side of the room and conjured up a stone basin. It burst apart when he glanced at it. Snape felt a shard sting his cheek, and a small flow of blood appear. A tongue of his magic licked the wound in the next instant, and it flickered and vanished.

He had seen what he was. He had seen the knots there, the bitternesses, the absolute and utter tangles of resentment and hatred and envy. It was that sight that had ultimately driven him to join the Death Eaters. What better place for someone with a soul that looked like that? He knew he could never find sanctuary in the Light, not with their golden Gryffindors, not when some of those who served the Light had tried to kill him in his sixth year at Hogwarts and had escaped expulsion only because of the Headmaster's favor. His later confirmation that Dumbledore felt guilty, in part, because Sirius Black had endured childhood abuse that Dumbledore had been unable to rescue him from did not change Snape's mind. Horrible things happened in other people's lives all the time. But those were attended to. His were ignored. It was the way of the world. He was ugly, inside and out, and the ugly were neglected for the beautiful and the charming. Snape had sometimes wondered how many of Lucius

Malfoy's victories were due to innate talent, and how many to the combination of his last name and his white-blond hair.

Another pair of targets started to form, but they didn't get more than a few limbs intact before his magic chewed out their hearts. Snape could not cast Dark Arts spells in the Sanctuary—they simply would not work, the peaceful air suppressing them before that could happen—but he could and did use his magic for pure and simple violence that worked against inanimate objects.

He paced the room, and then he stopped and leaned his forehead against the wall and closed his eyes.

He knew the cause of his latest outbursts. The dreams that had appeared to him so far were in chronological order. They tried to show him his memories from a different angle. Snape did not know that he could accept the vision of his soul as anything other than what it had been, what he had decided it was at seventeen. But he knew one thing. He knew what was coming next.

The three days at his mother's bedside, as Eileen Prince slowly died, as she told him truths that had scored his soul forever, that had killed the last moments when he might have referred to himself by his first name. Those three days had destroyed the last sanctuary he had. When he had buried his mother, he had gone, dry-eyed and bloody-minded, to Lucius, and Lucius had brought him, without pause, to the Dark Lord, and Snape had sold his soul to Voldemort for a Mark on his arm.

Before those three days, he had clung to the idea, pathetic and misplaced though it was, that part of him was worth something. His father was a Muggle, a rough and shallow and poor man. But his mother was a pureblood witch, of a line once powerful and even rich. Snape had thought of himself as half-pureblood—reared out of their society, knowing almost nothing of their rituals and their dances, forever a stranger in that much, but at least connected to them by blood. A halfblood Prince, if he could be nothing else.

And then his mother had told him what he truly was.

And Snape had gone out to cause pain to others. Why shouldn't he? Pain was the way of the world.

He did not want to face those memories again. He would rather hate than fear. He would rather brood on what he had become than remember how he had changed into what he was.

He did not want to remember—he rarely did, consciously—another way in which he and Harry were alike. Tobias Snape had left his own scars on Snape's soul, as James Potter had on Harry's. But the scars from both their mothers ran far, far deeper.

And both Lily Potter and Eileen Prince had believed they were doing the best things for their sons, in the end.

Snape conjured a stone pillar this time. It split down the center, and the pieces went spinning into corners, bouncing off each other with a series of sharp cracks, growing smaller and smaller each time they did so. Snape imagined each one as Sirius Black's skull.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He had not had much trouble sleeping since he came to the Sanctuary, and he wondered if only the odd dream—something about a book sparkling as he opened it, with a title that included the word *Medicamenta*—was to blame for his wakefulness now.

Someone laughed.

Harry sat up abruptly, because he knew that laughter, but it was too late. The bird sitting on the end of his bed, lizard-tailed, claw-winged, red-eyed, tooth-beaked, with feathers that shimmered like an oil slick, had already flown at him and raked its talons down his left arm from his shoulder to his stump. Harry hissed at the pain, and watched as the wounds froze over before any blood could fall, just like every other wound he'd received from the bird.

He raised his head to glare as the bird danced gleefully over the end of his bed. "What do you want?" he hissed.

You will not know until it is too late. The words seemed to appear in his mind as if he'd always known them. I am preparing you. Marking you. Warning you. Binding you. The bird screeched, a more unpleasant sound than its laugh. We are all bound, you and he and I, and we cannot escape. But I can arrange the bond to my liking.

“If you would tell me what you are talking about—“

You could still do nothing. It is not a binding about which things can be done. The bird flew at him, and, as always, Harry ducked. Again came the laughter, and then it faded above him.

Harry was left to sit and shake in place, until the steady ache from his arm reminded him that he should do something to heal the wound. He placed his hand on the scratches and closed his eyes, concentrating. Nothing happened, and Harry cursed, voice trembling still.

From what he could tell, the bird was a creation of pure magic, and its vicious temper reminded Harry of his own magic just after it had escaped from the phoenix web, growing to sentience under intense pressure. His magic had been uninterested in anything except punishing his parents for confining it, even though, by then, Harry had not wanted to hurt them. That this creature was interested in hurting Harry...

Did I hurt the wizard that it belongs to? Is he imprisoned somewhere, and the only way he can reach me is this? But the bird's been appearing for months. I don't know who it could be.

Harry took a deep breath, and sighed. It would mean explanations he didn't like, but he would have to go to Vera and show her the wounds, since his own magic couldn't heal them. They stung like blazes as he slid out of bed, and he tried not to move his arm too much.

He did pause on his way out of the room. He had thought he heard a faint scream, as if someone in pain. But it didn't sound again, and so Harry made his way slowly down the terrace steps, wincing as every last one jolted his arm.

He frowned as the bird's laughter repeated itself in the distance.

Intermission: Fever Dream

The world around him was dark, and close, and hot. The world outside breathed light rain, the coolness of early summer in this part of Yorkshire. But inside, with the fire blazing, and the windows shut, and the deep, sweet scent of sickness in the air, it could have been summer in a jungle.

Summer in a fever.

Severus waved his wand, and the fire flared higher. He gagged. From the bed came a rattling cough. Severus turned and looked towards it, thinking for a moment that his mother would fall asleep again.

A twinge hit his left arm. He rubbed it. There was a black symbol flickering there, smoke and fire, and then it faded. A snake and skull? Severus thought so.

And why not? he thought, as he moved to sit on the small collection of pillows not far from his mother's bed. I have thought of that often enough, in the last few days, and the atmosphere in here will affect me. But—there may be no need for that, even now.

Lucius had promised him that Severus could be a part of the Dark Lord's inner circle if he desired to be so. But Lucius promised many things, and if there was anything Severus had learned while he was at Hogwarts, it was wariness of promises made with a bright voice, or shining eyes—or, for that matter, half-lidded eyes in which wormwood cunning lingered. Lucius's promises could wait.

His mother was dying. It was important that Severus be here, that he see what happened when she did. He folded his arms on top of his legs and breathed in the sickness and the smoke. His head felt heavy. His thoughts drifted.

"Severus."

Severus turned. For a moment, the woman struggling to sit up in the bed—he knew better than to go to her and assist her—made him want to shake with shock. You're dead, you're dead, he wanted to

say, but he knew she wasn't. She was dying. And why did thinking of himself by his first name seem strange?

The half-formed thoughts swirled and vanished like the smoke as he watched his mother lean against her pillows. Eileen Prince had never been beautiful, and what little liveliness remained in her face had drained away and vanished soon after she married Tobias Snape. Or so Severus imagined; he only knew what his mother used to look like at all from the three old photographs she had shown him. She had long since gone sour-faced by the time he was born.

"Do you remember what we spoke of yesterday?" she asked him, and then paused to let out a rattling cough. Blue stars of light flared and flashed and vanished around her crabbed hands and her liver-spotted throat. Severus forced himself to watch those without emotion. His mother had Pandora's sickness, which opened the box of her own magic and turned it on her, depriving her of any skill with a wand and accelerating the aging. Her weakness had been exacerbated, doubtless, by the smoke and pollution of the Muggle town she lived in. But it really did not matter what she was dying of. She was, and they could not have sought help from St. Mungo's even if his mother in her pride would have consented to it. They had no money for the Healers.

"The way of the world," Severus said, which was an answer to both his own thoughts and his mother's question. He saw his mother's eyes flash with anger, and he bowed his head. He knew what came next. He mouthed the words along with her.

"Forget that accent, Severus. Shed it. I understand that being among the relics of your childhood brings it back, but you must learn to shed it, or you will never gain any respect." His mother spoke slowly, carefully, precisely. She spoke like the proper pureblood witch she'd been raised to be. Severus's voice, when he didn't watch it, imitated the Yorkshire accent of his Muggle father. He had struggled, with his mother's help, to overcome that defect, but he still slipped into it when he was—

Well. Here. The house at Spinner's End, the home of his childhood, the small and slovenly hovel where magic had taken root, in his

mother and himself, and grown strange and twisted, into a plant like belladonna if it was a plant at all.

His mother was trying to help him. Severus understood that. And mingled beneath his gratitude, twined with it, were helpless resentment of the world, that trying to sound different was necessary at all, and helpless resentment of her, that she had never tried to spare him from the harsh truths of the world as other mothers did. She had let him know what he looked like, what his chances were, with his mixed blood, in the wider wizarding world, and how his peers would regard him. He had gone to Hogwarts already knowing what he would find there, though nothing could have prepared him for the sheer malice of Sirius Black and James Potter. And so he had his mother to thank that he had not gotten—no, got—hurt more yet, but he also had her to hate for never having any illusions of a comfortable, safe, tame world to lose.

She had taught him to see with clear eyes. Hatred was more common than love. Behind all the grand illusions were common, petty secrets that others would kill to keep because of their pettiness. Honey and flattery were the sweetest poisons, and should never be swallowed.

“I understand,” he whispered.

“Good.” Eileen stopped and had to close her eyes for a moment. Severus lifted his head to study her. Her breath wheezed in and out of her lungs. A white star danced on her lips, then burst apart in a shower of sparks, and her coughing eased. By that, he knew it would not be long. Pandora’s sickness, like the woman for which it was named, let hope free from the box last of all.

“I want you to understand one thing more,” Eileen continued. “You have no claim to being pureblood, Severus.”

Severus did not know how long it was before he whispered, “What?” His heart seemed to hang motionless in his chest, like a slug plunged into a jar of Salting Solution. His memories danced through his head—memories of his mother telling him that his father could not understand him because he was magic, and because he came from a much nobler, older, purer line than anything a Muggle could dream of;

teaching him to write his name as Prince, and not Snape; telling him legends of dark purebloods and implying that he had a place among them. She had taught him to consider himself as pureblood in spirit. They would always scorn him, but he could honor them, and that meant the tie between them was never truly lost.

“You have no claim to being pureblood,” Eileen repeated, slowly, in that manner that said she knew he was stupid sometimes, but there was no excuse for that. It was the voice she had used until Severus finally managed to go cold. “You’re halfblood, and half-Muggle at that. That’s as good as being a Mudblood to most of the wizards who matter.” She let out another loud wheeze, and fell back against her pillows.

Severus blinked into the close, hot darkness. “I—you said that I—“

His mother cut him off with an impatient sigh. “And what did you think that was, Severus? The last gift a mother could give her child, of course. If I had taught you what you really were from the beginning, you would never grown a backbone and some pride in yourself, and your magic would not have manifested.” She gave one of her older smiles. “And your father would never have realized how pointless it was to try and control you.” She focused on him again. “I thought that once you reached Hogwarts, were Sorted into Slytherin, and listened to some of your Housemates, you would lose the illusions on your own. But you did not. I saw what you wrote in my old Potions book, Severus.”

Severus bowed his head. The Half-Blood Prince. He’d called himself that. It was an appeal to the one thing about himself that he could be proud of, other than his skills in Dark Arts and Potions. All those things came from his mother.

And now—

“And I—“

“It is time for you to lose the last of your illusions,” his mother cut in mercilessly. But is it merciless to pull out the weeds, so that the herbs survive? Severus thought, his eyes wide and focused on the fire.

“You are not a child any longer. You should have stopped being a child long since. You are not pureblood, Severus, not a Prince. Neither are you a filthy Mudblood wallowing away in the sty, not even aware of what more there is to aspire to. I taught you to look upward at least, thank Merlin. You are an ugly, wizened, tough survivor. No one will ever care for you for yourself. If they pretend to do so, it is only another illusion, because who can love someone who only possesses useful skills, and not beauty or blood-right? But they might pretend to love you and lure you into a trap because of it, out of hatred. You have seen that. You must fight for a place, and never stop fighting. You must never yield. You must never think of yourself as a Prince, because then you would go easy on yourself, and begin to believe that you deserve things you cannot have.” She leaned forward. “You will have nothing but what you fight for, Severus, and you deserve nothing if you cannot hold on to it. Do you understand me?”

The whole house seemed to be swaying from side to side. Severus felt that he had never noticed before how small it was, how dark, how close. And he had never felt more the sallowness of his own skin, the lankness of his own hair, the fact that he did not have a face like any pureblood wizard's he had ever seen, self-confident and beautiful and assured of its own place.

“I said, do you understand me, Severus?”

“I understand,” said Severus. And he did. He looked up at her, and felt the twined gratitude and resentment and hatred and love and clarity stand up in him like a quintaped. “I understand, Eileen.”

Eileen watched him for a long moment. Severus stared back at her. He felt as if he were seeing her for the first time. Cross and sullen she might be, but she was pureblood. The blood flowed in her veins and made her shine. She had a place.

It was no wonder it had taken her so long to get through to him. He was a halfblood, and inherently deficient of understanding. But he would have to hide that and gain understanding, wield his intelligence like the double-edged sword it was, in order to make sure that no one pureblood ever found out his weakness and used it against him.

And everyone would. Now, he grasped that. Now, he understood.

“Good,” Eileen said then, and leaned back on her pillows, closing her eyes. “Bury me, Severus.”

Severus lowered his head and stared at his hands. The sound of his first name already rang wrong in his ears. It denied what he was. It was an ancient, noble name, and he did not deserve that.

Nor did he deserve his mother’s name.

He wondered if he could reconcile himself to his father’s name, and all that came with it. And then he knew that he would have to. It was the only way to remind himself, at all times, of what he was, and yet give himself the strength and the goad to struggle for a place in the only society worth being a part of, that of pureblood wizards.

He closed his eyes and breathed in sickness and smoke, and thought of himself as Snape. He let the wounds on his soul bleed, knowing they would scar eventually, and he would be stronger for the scars.

Eileen had dipped him in the River Styx, just as Achilles’ mother had in the old stories, but, like Thetis, she had only done it so that he would survive. And Snape planned to have no heel to make him vulnerable to his enemies.

Not my fear of werewolves. Not my fondness for anyone else. Not my blood.

Not ever again.

Chapter Two: Demonstrations In a Hollow Room

Harry wished he had a lynx form outside of dreams. He thought it would be a useful skill if he could flatten his ears. And, at the moment, he wanted to do something that would show his extreme irritation and displeasure and worry and reluctance.

You could turn around and leave this room alone. No one would have to know. Only Vera knew you might seek this room out, and you didn't say you would do it today. It's your choice.

And Harry might even have believed that, if not for the stubbornness that had grown in him over the last week and a half. He no longer believed that there was any value in some parts of his training—especially the parts that disobliged him in simple things on a daily basis—and that had led him to look critically at other decisions he'd made. Were they the best choices? Or had he merely made them because of a lack of time and a pressing need to do something else, and then let the bad choices solidify into habit?

He had seen how people became slaves of habit, slaves of prejudice. He never wanted to be one.

And that had led him to spend the last few days, as he recovered from the slashes down his left arm and told Vera, Draco, and Snape everything he could remember about the bird, analyzing two of his choices. One he had eventually decided wasn't the best choice, but it also wasn't something he could change right away. He would need McGonagall's help, and Snape's, and the help of the Black libraries and the Hogwarts library. That had to wait until he left the Sanctuary.

The other didn't—not when Vera had already told him about one of the rooms that could help him.

Harry stood now outside that room, and stared at the door, and gnawed his lip. His hand traced the ending of his wrist, the severed stump, over and over and over again.

Chattering voices of different opinions clamored in his head.

You did decide that your choice was hasty and badly made.

It's silly, and unimportant, and you should be learning as much as you can about useful weapons in the war while you're still here and have access to knowledge that doesn't exist outside the Sanctuary.

Most of what you think is silly and unimportant has turned out not to be so. And nothing can get in the way of your healing. You didn't let Loki make you stay in the wizarding world. Are you going to let your own preconceptions hold you back from doing something that you know you should do?

Those were two good arguments for going forward, against only one for staying where he was. Harry took a deep breath and tugged open the door to the room.

Vera had described the Sanctuary as a shrine to the present. The rooms set aside to hold and contain the presence of magic corresponded to types of magic that actually existed in the world, somewhere. The moment a kind of magic ceased to exist, because its last practitioner died or because the knowledge or ingredients that were necessary for it were lost, then the room would vanish. The Sanctuary looked to the future, not the past.

Harry stepped into a large room, perhaps round, perhaps square. From the outside, it was rectangular, but Harry already knew that the insides of these rooms perhaps didn't correspond to their outsides. In any case, it was difficult to make out the shape because of the mirrors that crowded the walls. Some mirrors had round frames, some sharply pointed edges, some star-shaped protrusions that overlapped with the other mirrors and made it difficult to be sure of what was real. Harry waved, and a thousand thousand Harry-shaped images waved back. Some had slightly different faces, some slightly different eyes, some slightly different bodies. The images reflected more than once—when mirrors were set opposite from one another so that a long series of possible Harrys stretched away—looked very different.

Harry stood there in silence for a long moment. So far, the mirrors worked as Vera had told him they did. They showed images of what

could be, all the possible ways that Harry could be different, marching corridors of side-realities. They could not be used as doors to those realities; if that magic had ever existed, Vera had told him, it was lost, and the Sanctuary wouldn't demonstrate it. But they could show transitions between the real Harry and a possible one, the various shades, for example, through which his eyes might pass on the way from green to blue.

And that meant—

That meant—

Harry took a deep breath and lifted his left wrist.

A ripple ran through the mirrors, a shudder so intense that for a moment Harry feared they would break. Vera had warned him about this, though. So long as he kept his left wrist low and at his side, out of range of the glass, it might be anything; the possibility was undefined. When he forced the mirrors to reflect it, then each image had to become what it would be in that other reality.

And it worked. Harry saw himself, in the nearest, oval mirror, with a left wrist that ended in scar tissue. When he turned his head, he saw left hands, left hooks, images of himself with an intact left hand and a missing right one, and, more than once, a wing or a flipper on that limb. He blinked, then forced himself to look away from those strange, beguiling images and to one of the ones with a left hand.

And on a diagonal to the oval mirror that reflects me as I really am. Vera had told him about that, too. "True" images, ones that would actually lead him from what he was to what he wanted to become, were more often found on the slant.

It took him several minutes to sort out a pattern. Then he looked at the series of transitional images that separated him from the final product, and shivered, and looked away again. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of madly swinging heads, so he shut his eyes to avoid them.

There were ten images between himself and the Harry with a left hand who still looked almost exactly like him.

Only ten.

Harry made himself look again. Each of the first three images had a smaller shimmer of Dark magic above his left wrist. The fourth one had a star of Dark magic there—probably, Harry thought, the last curse to burst, or the deepest one, which would take more effort to break than the others. The fifth one simply had an ordinary, scarred wrist. The sixth and the seventh one had shadowy images of left hands, and the eighth and ninth possessed hands that they held gingerly. The tenth image looked completely comfortable with both his hands, and caught Harry's eye with a solemn expression that, Harry imagined, did not look completely terrified.

It might be the same expression on his face right now.

He controlled the impulse to just walk out of the room. Instead, he studied the really important images, the ones that detailed the curses, so that he knew what he could expect them to look like at each stage of the breaking. Argutus could help, of course, by reflecting the hidden spells in his scales. Harry would just as soon not set out to break one and then have it warp in a different direction, though. And knowing Bellatrix and her insanity, he couldn't say that wouldn't happen.

Then he turned and paced quickly to the door, lowering his eyes so that the dizzying army moving with him partially faded from his sight.

Only ten steps, and I can have my hand again.

He shut the door of the room and leaned against it. A light, misty rain fell in the Sanctuary this morning. Harry could hear birds calling that he hadn't heard before, energetic cries that seemed to praise the rain and the coolness and even the gray of the skies as part of a good life.

He had examined his reasons for not trying to regrow his hand, and decided they weren't good ones. He would look weak? There were many other ways that he might look weak to his allies, including the

kind of emotional breakdown he'd experienced over the dead children during the siege, and he was working to heal those wounds. He didn't have time? He had time if he made it. He didn't want to make it seem as if that was something he cared about, when many, many other things mattered more?

Well, that last was still true. But Harry hadn't been able to say why he felt that way. Why should regrowing his hand be less important to him than making sure that Ignifer, for example, won free of the infertility curse her father had placed on her?

He didn't have a good answer for that. His gaping terror of being selfish wasn't a good answer. And he had to be more selfish, to stop himself before he broke down as he nearly had before he came to the Sanctuary, or they would lose the war.

So here he was. He would try to break the curses and regrow his hand.

He shook his head and moved quickly, sharply away from the room. He wanted to go watch Draco eliminate some of the taint on his soul with Nina's encouragement, or help Snape brew a potion. He wanted to listen to Argutus ramble on about his own beauty, which he was more concerned with suddenly, or listen to the soft hisses of the Many snake as she conversed in half-understood fragments. He wanted to do anything that didn't focus on himself.

Draco smiled when Harry slipped into his room behind Nina, but didn't take his eyes from her face. Likewise, Nina nodded a welcome to Harry, but the words she spoke next, soft and soothing, were to Draco.

"I can see your soul as a jeweled construct, with emerald and opalescent wheels."

"Of course it's jeweled," said Draco, and had the delight of seeing Nina smile back at him. Harry raised his eyebrows in confusion. Of course he would. He tended to respond too seriously to Draco's arrogance, while Nina treated it for what it was, one more game to play or waltz to dance. Draco had often done the same thing with Narcissa when he first began his lessons in pureblood etiquette, and

had always enjoyed them more than his father's more formal efforts to drill him in the same things.

"It would be," Nina murmured. "Nothing less than the best for a Malfoy." She squinted thoughtfully off to the side, as if she were looking at his left shoulder. Draco hated it when she did that. It reminded him even more forcefully that she could see things he couldn't. That was annoying enough when it happened with Harry, and Harry was at least stronger, magically, than he was. Draco wondered, not for the first time, what he would see if he possessed Nina.

"Coils are wound among the wheels," Nina continued. "Springs. Clockwork. All of them are dark, the same shade of gray. I can tell you what I think they are, and you can tell me which one doesn't belong."

Draco nodded. They had done this before. He had to admit, it was interesting to learn all sorts of things about himself that he would never have suspected before. He saw Harry lean forward, and took the opportunity to set his shoulders back and lift his chin, determined to make both Harry and Nina proud of him.

Nina narrowed her eyes now as if squinting against the sun, and said, "One is the impulse to prove yourself regardless of what you might have to do in the process." She smiled again, her expression growing brighter. "I think I should know that that one is your own."

Draco inclined his head, his own eyes and cheeks blazing with his amusement. Harry shifted again, briefly catching his attention. Draco caught a glimpse of a very intriguing emotion in his eyes, but he couldn't take the time to study it, because Nina was droning on.

"One is the impulse to grow without restraint, to have so much magical power that nothing can stop or check it." Nina lost her smile first, and then the playful tone to her voice. "Could that one be a legacy of your encounter with Voldemort?"

"I—possibly." Draco could remember times when he had felt the impulse for himself, though. At one time, little had mattered to him but

matching Harry in magical strength. He had called on an ancestor to give him that power, with what seemed, in hindsight, perilously little research and horrendous impatience. But, on the other hand, he thought he had subdued that idea. Voldemort would not have.

Nina nodded, and went on. "Then there is the impulse to cause pain to others." She didn't say anything else this time.

Draco squirmed in place, his cheeks flushing. "What kind of pain?" he asked. "Can you tell?"

"There are many different roots to it." The Seer folded her hands almost primly in front of her, as if to say, whatever she had seen in her own soul when she looked at it, this had not been there. "It might be pure sadism at some points along the coil. It might be the simple desire to irritate someone with a hex who's irritated you with a hex. It might be a wish that someone would go away and stop bothering you or your Harry."

Draco nodded. Well, he should have expected that. He would have been more horrified and ashamed if he had a simple soul, one where he could pick the right answer every time Nina had a question. "I don't think the sadism is mine," he said. "I do want revenge, and I do think my Harry should take it more often than he does—" another shift in his peripheral vision "—but I don't take that much pleasure in watching someone else suffer. I take much more satisfaction in knowing that they'll never hurt me again."

"Very well, then," said Nina, and eased backward on the rug she'd spread to sit on. "So, you are ready?"

"I am," said Draco.

He braced himself as Nina brought forth a small mirror she'd pulled from one of the Sanctuary's rooms; Merlin knew which one, since Draco so far hadn't had much time to go exploring. The mirror had two halves, one that bulged outward and one that rippled backward into the frame. Nina tilted it so that both halves reflected his face and pulled her wand from a pocket of her robe.

“Vitrum reapse,” she whispered, and gestured.

Draco’s face rippled as if someone had thrown a stone in a pool of water. Draco reached forward with his own magic, his own mind, at the same moment, grasping at his thoughts, pulling them and tugging, using the image in the mirror as a stabilizing point. This was reality, this was truth, and he would make himself into the Draco Malfoy whose image he saw in the mirror.

It would have been impossible if he hadn’t had the possession gift. But part of learning to possess others had been learning an exquisite consciousness of himself—where his thoughts ended and another’s began, primarily. He always needed to be able to tell what was him in another person’s mind, so that he didn’t accidentally sabotage his own plans. The only reason he couldn’t heal himself of Voldemort’s taint was that the slime had gone so deep into his soul. He had to look intently at one point of his own mind before he could see the incongruities.

Nina had pointed him to the right one this time, he thought. He found a twisting, alien bit of presence in the part of his thoughts devoted to pain and revenge, and he carved it out of himself with relish. As always, he directed it down the path of his thoughts towards his mouth. He had to expel Voldemort from his body somehow, and though, strictly speaking, he could have imagined the dark taint as a mist that would float away and leave him alone, it was easier this way, to think of it as mingled bile and poison he spat out.

He opened his eyes as his mouth moved, and saw a splatter of saliva blossom on the mirror. A moment later, it turned black, and he saw the quivering, caught worm of Voldemort’s presence. He nodded and sat back, beaming at Nina, who beamed in turn and cleansed the mirror with another wave of her wand. Draco imagined he could hear the worm screaming as it burned.

That delight in pain is all my own, he thought.

“I think it’s time that we stopped for today,” said Nina softly, rising to her feet. Draco wondered if she was stopping solely for his sake, or for Harry’s, or perhaps for her own. “You’ve yanked out three tendrils,

and it's harder and harder for me even to see a place where others might be hiding. I think you're almost healed, Draco."

Draco inclined his head, accepting the glad news—the more glad because he knew the Seers wouldn't chase him out of the Sanctuary just because he had healed. He could still stay here until the end of the summer, and he could focus more on Harry once his own mind was cleansed.

"Just don't forget what my soul looks like," he told Nina as she made her way to the door. "You won't ever see something that beautiful again, and it should remain to brighten your life when I'm gone."

Nina rolled her eyes and shut the door. That confirmed Draco's belief that she'd stopped the soul-seeing for her sake. Unless she was deeply tired, she always came up with a witty retort of some kind.

Draco went at once to the couch Harry had taken a seat on, capturing him with a kiss and an arm around his shoulders before he could stand. Harry blinked, dazed, and then his face broke into a bright grin. "Draco!" he exclaimed. "You're moving faster than you were yesterday?"

"Yes, bloody finally," Draco grouched as he sat down. "I still don't think bed-rest was the cure for me once my headaches ended." He caught Harry's chin and tilted his face towards him. Harry bore it, looking patient. Draco frowned. That unfamiliar emotion he'd thought Harry had expressed earlier was gone, and only entirely familiar affection and exasperation looked back at him.

Well, perhaps talking about Nina will bring it back. "The way she helps me is wonderful, isn't it?" he asked casually.

Ah, there it is. The emotion traveled through Harry's eyes like a comet across the night sky, and then he was nodding and agreeing, but Draco sat close enough to him to see what it had been.

"Harry," he said, and he tried to keep the delighted purr out of his voice, but he couldn't, he really couldn't. "Are you jealous?"

Harry blinked, then said, "Honestly, Draco, of course not. I don't believe that you'd ever sleep with her. Besides," he added, standing and slipping out of Draco's arms, "for all I know, you don't even like girls that way."

"Oh, I don't mind them," said Draco, leaning back on the couch and watching Harry's tense shoulders. He shouldn't hide from this. We're supposed to be letting down our barriers and showing our emotions anyway. "You're the one I like, Harry. But you wouldn't get jealous over bed-sharing, anyway, when we haven't even shared one. You're jealous because she can See part of me that you can't, aren't you?"

"I am not jealous."

Draco laughed at him. "Liar."

Harry glared at him over his shoulder. "I am not," he said. "You need her help to heal, Draco. It would be unworthy, not to mention stupid, for me to get jealous over that." He frowned and trailed his hand over the edge of Draco's bed.

"Well, jealousy often doesn't have a rational basis," said Draco comfortably. He patted the couch next to him again. "Why are you on the other side of the room? Come sit next to me."

"I don't want to."

And now he's pouting! This is wonderful. Draco would have thought it worth coming to the Sanctuary, and coaxing a reluctant Harry to come with him and away from a war-torn wizarding world, for the sake of this alone. "Yes, you do," he said. "Or you did a moment ago. But now you think that you shouldn't be jealous, and you're—what? Punishing yourself by denying your urge to seek out my company?"

He saw Harry stop moving. Then he turned around and glared at Draco again. "If I didn't know that Seeing can't be taught," Harry said, "I would say that you'd been taking lessons from Nina. Or Vera, perhaps, since she's my Seer."

“You still don’t like someone seeing you that well,” said Draco, and shook his head. He couldn’t name the emotion that welled up in him. He decided to call it protectiveness, because that made a good name. “Get used to it, Harry. I intend to know all of you before I’m done.”

“I’ll change,” said Harry, his voice soft. Draco wondered if he even realized what he was saying as he examined Draco intently. “I’ll change, and then you won’t know me anymore. And the same thing will happen to you, and to Snape—” Harry checked himself. “Well, I think it’ll happen to Snape. Maybe not. I’ve never seen someone so determined not to change.”

“I’ll read you anew, then,” said Draco, and stood. He walked slowly across the room to Harry, who stood watching him come. Draco clasped his wrist and rubbed gently at his forehead, over the scar that marked Harry as the real recipient of Voldemort’s Killing Curse. “What is it, Harry? Do you really think that I’ll wake up someday and just decide to give up on you?”

“No,” said Harry.

“Then what?”

Harry sighed. “I still understand why someone would want to see you and love you better than I understand why someone would want to see and love me.” He tugged at Draco’s grasp on his hand, then forced himself to stand still even before Draco could ask for it, and shook his head. “And that’s the truth,” he said, sounding half-unnerved. “No matter how stupid it sounds, there it is.”

Draco curved one arm around Harry’s shoulders and tugged him forward until his head rested on his shoulder. “Is that the reason you haven’t wanted me attending your sessions with Vera where you work on removing your mother’s training against pleasure?” he murmured into his ear.

“Partially,” Harry said, his voice going dry. “The other part is that the training often involves hot baths, and I don’t think you could control your impulse to stare at me sitting naked in the water. And that would be rather distracting.”

Draco's mouth went dry, and then he realized that Harry had made a joke, and what kind of joke it was. He laughed, and it felt like the most genuine laughter he'd ever given. He hugged Harry hard enough that Harry both lost his balance and his breath, and did it until Harry pounded feebly at him with one arm to let him go.

Then he said into Harry's ear, "Most of the world would give everything to be standing where I am now, Harry, if they only knew you. And I'll say that until you believe it. If you change, I'll say it again."

Harry tensed for a moment, as if thinking of a further objection, and then relaxed. "Thank you," he whispered.

Draco held him, and smiled, and decided that it could do no harm to not tell Harry what idea this conversation had just spawned in his mind. Harry needed some surprises and excitement in his life, after all, since they were currently in the middle of a peaceful haven where he received none.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Harry saw Snape's back tense from across the room. He'd been standing in front of a cauldron bubbling with a thick purple liquid, and stirring as if it were the only thing that existed. Now he shifted as if to conceal its presence from Harry, even before he smoothly turned on his heel.

"Of course, Harry," he said. "I'll need the mandrake roots boiled first, before they're cut. If you will?" He nodded to a table on the other side of the room that contained a cauldron full of water, a glass bowl to shield the fire, and a pile of dried mandrakes.

Harry nodded back and crossed over to the roots, gathering them, squeezing them to remove most of the juice—as one should always do before boiling mandrakes—and using his magic to create a fire in the glass bowl. He kept sneaking glances at Snape's back as he dropped the crushed roots into the cauldron, though. He couldn't help it. Snape showed an uneasy awareness divided between him and the potion. It took a lot to disturb him like that.

“Are you all right, sir?” he ventured at last.

Snape’s hand tightened on his wand, and then he slid it into his pocket and turned around. “Dreams,” he said.

Harry blinked. “What?” He crushed the latest mandrake root so hard that stinking juice ran out over his fist. He winced.

“I am healing through dreams,” said Snape, voice flat. “I refused to allow the Seers to help me. The Sanctuary sends dreams in that case, images that dig up the buried emotions and memories and make me reflect on them from a different perspective.” He laughed. It sounded like something breaking. “Or that is what is supposed to happen. In the last nightmare, I lost myself so completely to memory and bitterness that I never knew it was a dream until I awoke.” His hand rose and began to caress the sleeve that hid the Dark Mark, almost absently. “And that is less than helpful when healing,” he said.

His voice was clinical and dry on the last words. Almost, Harry thought. It shook on the last one.

That alone made Harry more concerned for Snape than he had ever been.

“Please, sir,” he said quietly. He put the mandrake root he was handling down completely and faced Snape, but didn’t try to move closer to him. From the way he was staring off into the distance, and the soft, constant buzz in the air around him, Harry knew Snape’s wandless magic would try to open his belly or his throat if he got close now. And Snape had enough emotion to carry, that was plain, without adding guilt to the mix. “I think you should talk to the Seers. If Joseph is—too much like Sirius—” he didn’t think the man was, personally, and it was just Snape’s blind hatred and bias talking, but Snape had fastened on an insistence that yes, he was “—I’m sure there are other Seers who would talk to you.”

Snape abruptly blinked, and the buzz in the air died down. Harry hardly had time to draw a breath of relief before Snape was shaking his head.

“What, sir?” Harry asked.

“I should not have told you,” said Snape, voice and face empty. “You are healing. You should think of your own soul and thoughts, not mine.” He turned, and the way he swept towards the cauldron moved the air so much Harry caught a faint whiff of the purple liquid inside. He wrinkled his nose. It smelled awful, and completely unfamiliar, which meant Snape was probably inventing something new. “I will bear the dreams alone. Thank you for your advice to talk to the Seers. It makes sense. Should the dreams overwhelm me, I will seek their assistance.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “No.”

Snape glanced at him over his shoulder, face still blank. “No, what?”

“No, I think what you’re doing is unreasonable.” Harry folded his arms and scowled at Snape. “This is the exact kind of thing you’re always warning me against doing—concealing my wounds until I have no choice but to get help because I’m drowning in my own blood. You scolded me out of it when we had to coordinate the battle at Hogwarts. I would scold you out of it now, but I think you could find an answer for every one of my taunts. So I’m just telling you that I think it’s reckless, stupid, and hypocritical of you to do this.” He paused, just long enough to let the impudence have the most impact, and added, “Sir.”

Snape’s eyes burned with something wild and dangerous. Harry had not seen this before, but he had felt it. When Snape came to rescue him from the storm his own magic had raised at the end of his second year, when his mind had been broken in shards and Snape had had to use Legilimency to help him rebuild it, his own magic had unfolded around him in response to the Dark power Harry was calling. This was the Death Eater’s edge, the man Harry thought had prepared himself to kill, and, before his crisis of conscience, had enjoyed every second of it.

“I will handle my healing on my own,” Snape snarled. “I am an adult, Harry, and fully aware of my own beliefs and choices—“

Harry snorted. "Of course you are, sir," he said. "That would be why you carried a childish grudge forward twenty years. You still don't see my brother for who he really is, thanks to living in the past. You still hate Sirius and compare people to him who are nothing like him. You still carry a fear of werewolves that you've transmuted into hatred, rather than overcome. And I think that you only struggled to overcome your hatred of my father because you knew that, otherwise, I would see what you did for me as revenge on James instead of justice for me. All of those are absolutely lovely examples of adult behavior."

As he watched Snape's face flush with rage, Harry had to reconsider his idea of whether he possessed enough sarcasm to taunt his guardian out of his childish obsessions.

"Get out," Snape said, and one of the knives he'd placed beside his own cauldron whizzed across the room and buried itself to the hilt in the wood beside Harry's head.

Harry glared at him. "Do you really think that impresses me?" he asked. "One nice thing about being a Lord-level wizard is that magical temper tantrums pale next to what I can do in battle."

Another knife flew. Harry doubted that Snape was seeing him at the moment. He was panting, his face livid, his eyes staring into another time and place. Harry conjured a shield that bounced the knife, and cocked his head.

"Talk to Joseph, sir," he said softly. "I don't blame you for this, not any of this. But I've finally decided that healing is important, you see. That means everybody's healing. I'm going to be just as stubborn about this as I am about the issue of forgiveness and reconciliation, or rights for magical creatures. Do you really want to be on the opposite side of an issue from me that I'm that determined about?"

"Get out." The words were low and ugly, and this time Snape's cauldron rose from its base, slowly revolving.

Harry rolled his eyes and did. The determination remained in his head as he walked down the steps towards his own room.

Idiot. He taught me those lessons. And now he claims that he'll hide and rage and scream but refuse to seek help? Idiot. No, he won't. Snape knew he should apologize to Harry.

But it took him hours to work up the barriers with which to do it—to make sure that the rage lay down, tamed and still; to wrap his emotions with rocks and sink them to the bottom of the Occlumency pools; to forget the urge to snarl when he thought about Harry's words and what they had done.

He made himself cool and composed, as he had been when he was a spy among the Dark Lord's ranks, and went to Harry's room.

He found Harry reading, alone, unless one counted the tiny gold-and-green cobra coiled around his throat and the silvery Omen snake dozing at his feet. Snape did not, knowing neither of them could understand English. The Many snake did lift her head when he came in and give him an unfriendly hiss. Harry hissed back, and the cobra at once wound into place again, as motionless as a metal ornament.

Harry stared at him expectantly.

Snape stared back, narrow-eyed. This wasn't the boy he had been expecting to find. He knew Harry had not understood his outburst and what drove him to speak as he did earlier, and so he knew Harry's words to him could not have been planned. He had expected contrition, startlement, perhaps a demand for an explanation.

Harry just waited.

Snape snarled, at both himself and Harry, and said stiffly, "I apologize. I should not have thrown objects at you, no matter how angry I was. It is inexcusable treatment when dealing with an abused child." He inclined his head, feeling as if his neck were physically objecting to the movement.

“You shouldn’t have,” said Harry. “But you have a reason for it. The air of the Sanctuary is wearing away at you. What are you feeling? What events are you reliving in the dreams?” He leaned forward, and though his searching green eyes did not carry a Legilimens’s probing touch, they were intense enough otherwise that Snape felt unnerved.

“I do not need to tell you,” Snape said. Despite his best efforts, his voice was descending into a growl again. “Nor should I. You have your own healing to concentrate on, and receive assistance with.”

Harry uttered a dry laugh. “And because of that, you think we should simply play the roles we always have? I heal, or try to, while you herd me along and retain your own implacable, frozen stillness.” He shook his head. “It isn’t working, sir. Can’t you see that? If you had quieted the ghosts that haunt you, you would never have lost control this easily. I know how thick your walls are. I don’t think they’re simply weakening in this place, whatever the Seers may believe. I think the emotions that are rising are so powerful they can’t be dealt with any other way.”

Snape folded his arms. So he thinks he knows me? He ignored the uncomfortable twinge that said Harry probably did know him, as well as anyone living could claim to. Dumbledore had known more, but he had scoured Snape’s mind for evidence of his motives when Snape came to the Light. And his mother—

Do not think of her.

He let out a steady breath, never taking his eyes from Harry’s. He claims he knows me, and yet he has never reached the same conclusions about me that Eileen did. That means he is ignoring evidence of my true tendencies yet.

“I will decide how best to attend to my own healing, Harry,” he said, making his voice deep and calm. “I have already chosen to suffer the dreams rather than use Dreamless Sleep. I—”

“That’s a step,” said Harry. “Progress. But not enough. Even these memories are weakening you severely, or you would never have attacked me. I think they’d still be there even if you started using the

Dreamless Sleep now, sir. And when we go back into the world, I know that you won't be able to afford the weakness, any more than you want it. And I don't want you to be faltering. So it would be best if you would heal the breach now."

Snape cast a wandless, nonverbal spell to remove glamours. He thought for a moment that he might have surprised Vera sitting in Harry's place, disguised by some of the innate magic of the Sanctuary. But the spell worked, and Harry was still Harry, rolling his eyes as he felt the tingle along his skin.

"Is it really so hard?" Harry questioned, a tinge of impatience in his voice. "It's the same logic you gave me when I wanted to dig in my heels and remain as I was. Better to be whole and strong that way, no matter how much it hurts, than ignore your own weak points."

"I am whole!" Snape snarled, and then stopped as he saw spittle flying from his lips. He could feel rage coiling in his chest as it had not done since Harry's second year at Hogwarts. He had once thought that only Black could affect him that way. Even in James Potter's trial, he had been more in control. He had kept his motives in mind, and what would happen if his magic slipped its leash and slew Potter. And now...

Now, he did not know which way to turn, and all directions were confused.

"I want to help you," Harry told him, his eyes shining earnestly. "I want to see you talk to someone if you can't bear to take help from me. I want—"

"And it is not fair that you should be playing an adult role, shouldering adult burdens," Snape said, in what was not quite a shout.

Harry actually snorted at him. "What the fuck does fair have to do with any of it?" he asked. "We live in the world as it is. No, perhaps I should have been coddled and cuddled and spared any responsibility, but as it is, that didn't happen." He shrugged, never taking his eyes from Snape. "So I'll do what I have to do, and that includes both healing and helping you."

“What makes you think that you have to do it?” Snape could feel the world around him tumbling faster and faster, as if he were on the blade of a sword a master swordsman were spinning in his hands.

Harry blinked. “Because I love you. Obviously.”

In Snape’s state, the words were not ones he could hear and not react.

His magic made the walls of the room shake. The Omen snake raised his head and hissed, his long body flexing. The Many snake actually slipped down Harry’s shoulder before he spoke to her in Parseltongue and she stopped.

“If you really want to do it that way,” Harry said.

And his magic answered Snape, with a jolt that welled up out of the stone under Snape’s feet and shook him back and forth, touching nothing else in the room. It felt like a springtime river in flood, bold with an impatient power that Snape had never encountered even in the Dark Lord.

“I’m stronger than you are,” Harry reminded him. “You can’t convince me to back off that way.” His tone was sharp, but it was affection that made it so.

And the world was a mass of dizzying light and emotion.

Snape turned and ran.

Harry nearly rose to go after him, but then checked himself as he heard the hissing, like a hive of hornets, that accompanied Snape. His magic would lash out wildly now, and once again, he would only blame himself once he returned to sanity. Harry did write a swift note to Vera, advising her to keep guests and Seers out of Snape’s way for the evening—though he thought they would probably know if they were at all magically sensitive, and Snape would probably return to his room and conjure things to destroy soon—and waved it in the air. A white dove appeared in moments, holding out its foot, to which a message tube was already attached. Harry smiled at it as he slid the

note into the tube. The doves were the Sanctuary's owls, condensed out of the pure magic that filled the air and given many similar duties.

"Take this to Vera, if you would," he said.

The dove flapped its wings and gave a bob of its head and a quick coo, and soared away. Harry watched it go, then sank back down in his seat, shaking his head.

"Why is he being stupid?" Argutus demanded, flowing up and "sitting" beside Harry, which meant several silver coils overlapped the couch with another two to spare, holding Argutus's head at the height of Harry's face.

"Because he's afraid," said Harry.

"Ah." Argutus turned and looked along his scales. "Well, I am not often afraid, but you are. So it must make sense to you."

It did, Harry thought. But he no longer felt like letting fear control his life.

He stood so suddenly that the Many snake had to clench around his throat. Argutus regarded him with surprise as he strode towards the door.

"I'm going to visit Draco," Harry told him, and left the Omen snake to follow or not, as he liked.

Yes, he thought as he took the steps a few at a time, he was tired of letting fear control him. He would find Draco, and if he was free at the moment from a session with Nina, he would speak to him immediately, and if he wasn't, then Harry would wait. Either way, he wanted to talk to him.

He wanted to tell Draco he was going to regrow his hand.

Chapter Three: Pools of Grief and Pools of Gold

Harry sighed. “Yes, I promise I’ll close my eyes and try to enjoy this like a good little boy.” He met Vera’s gaze and held it until she gave him a slow nod. Her bare feet made soft slapping noises as she walked around the rim of the pool towards the door.

“You might want to think, Harry,” she said calmly over her shoulder, “why it is this part of your training that you resist overcoming, more than almost anything else.”

“I know,” Harry muttered, as the door shut behind Vera. “I don’t like it because it’s silly, both to think about and because I have to put so much effort into overcoming the smallest parts of it. The more effort I have to exert, the more frustrated I get, and the more likely I am to give up.”

But he’d said that to Vera already, and she had simply watched him with serene eyes and asked if he wanted to stop trying to overcome his training. Harry had told her no, and so they’d progressed through childish—in Harry’s opinion—reports of what a pear tasted like, and whether Harry liked a cool breeze or a warm one on his face better, and what chocolate actually tasted like to him, when he was forced to slow down and think about it carefully. Accustoming himself to tastes and smells and mild sensations seemed like wastes of time to Harry even now, but he knew he had no rational reason for feeling that way, and presumably he would be able to demand a Chocolate Frog over porridge someday, and that would benefit—

Well. Someone. Maybe even him.

He eyed the pool reluctantly. It was a stone basin set in the floor of the room that Vera had said the Seers called the Relaxation Room for lack of a better name. It had a concentrated form of the air that was everywhere in the Sanctuary, wearing away at a person’s emotional barriers like the sea carving rock, and would create what it thought was necessary to calm down that person, like a fine-tuned Room of Requirement. A pool full of hot water appeared every time Harry came in here. The room apparently thought he should get used to

that—no, more than that, take pleasure in it—before it would give him anything else.

Harry was still having the most problems overcoming the training his mother had given him to avoid touch. He could tolerate a few minutes of hugging, or the light touches from Draco that he had grown accustomed to. He had done much more than that in the Walpurgis Night ritual, and he'd tried to present that to Vera as a sign that, really, he'd climbed over more of the obstacles in his path than she thought he had.

She'd asked him to spend ten minutes in the pool in the Relaxation Room without squirming and wanting to get out.

So far, Harry could manage only five without squirming, and only a half hour altogether before a combination of impatience and discomfort drove him out of the water. There were so many better things he could be doing, not least seeking out the kinds of rooms in the Sanctuary that centered on magic he wanted to know and studying that.

He was going to try for a full hour this time, though. So he promised himself as he unhooked his robes with the help of his hand and the semi-permanent Levitation Charm that always hovered around him. He'd make it a full hour, and talk to Vera about it without rolling his eyes. Then she would let him do things that were actually useful.

He shrugged out of his shirt and trousers, as well, trying to ignore the shrieking in the back of his head. He felt far too vulnerable this way, especially in a strange place; he'd almost grown used to it in the Slytherin bedrooms at Hogwarts. He wanted to ward the door, or, better yet, collect his discarded clothes, put them back on, and make a dignified exit.

Well, I can't, and I won't, he thought, as he finally lowered himself into the water. The pool was more than big enough to let him stretch out. Vera had warned him the first day about falling asleep in the water and drowning, but she hadn't repeated the warning since she saw how absolutely unlikely Harry was to relax in it.

Harry found a seat on a stone step not far below the surface and craned his neck in several directions. Yes, he could see anyone open the door and approach from here. Yes, he had enough of his body out of the water to be able to leap to the attack if he had to. Yes, the water was thick and murky enough, with the glazed sheen of a hot spring, that anyone who didn't count his clothes wouldn't be able to tell what Harry had on under it.

He attempted to lean back and close his eyes. It was impossible. His neck felt like a bone or a dry stick against the rock, and his eyes remained stubbornly open, staring at the ceiling.

The water felt like slime against his skin.

Harry closed his eyes with an effort. He forced himself to remember how Lily had trained him to this—creating a warm sensation and then a disgusting one right after it, or soaking him with cold water and then having him dry out slowly, rather than with a charm or by being wrapped up in warm blankets and hustled to bed. It was only a sequence of events, or a sequence of spells, in some cases. It had clawed its way into his head, but so? Other things had attempted to claw their way into his head, including Tom Riddle. He hadn't let them. There was no reason to associate the water swirling against him now with the idea of not being able to rescue Connor, or the invisible slug trails that had appeared on his body in the wake of feeling warm.

Connor wasn't even here, for Merlin's sake, and neither was his mother.

Insidious thoughts were, though. They twined around him and pointed out, as Vera had, that learning to tolerate this kind of sensation, even relax into it, meant coming to terms with being vulnerable and lowering his guard. But the thoughts went a step further. Could he afford to lower his guard? Harry really didn't think so. A moment of peace was one that Voldemort would choose for attack. A moment of relaxation could mean he lost the edge on his reflexes necessary to strike, or dodge, or jump out of the water and protect those he loved from someone.

It could be actively harmful to the war effort if he let himself heal from this part of his training. Other parts, yes, he couldn't see how it would harm his allies if he learned to enjoy the taste of a pear, but this one? Very dangerous.

Relieved with this new justification not to stay in the water any longer, Harry started to stand up. Then he saw the door of the Relaxation Room swing open, and he ducked back into the pool, his heart hammering and his magic abruptly stirring to life around him. Had an enemy actually come into the Sanctuary? One who wouldn't hesitate to hurt him? Or maybe it was an honest mistake. Harry had thought that Vera had told other guests and Seers when he was using this pool, so that they wouldn't put themselves out, but perhaps someone had missed the announcement.

"Harry."

Worse. It wasn't an accidental intruder, or an enemy who was taking advantage of his being vulnerable to hurt him.

It was Draco.

Harry slid further down in the water, even though disgust was making him shudder now, and it got worse as the liquid crept up his chest to the base of his throat. Draco strode to the edge of the pool and stood looking at him, head tilted and eyes bending at the corners with amusement, even though he didn't wear a smile.

"Draco." Harry hated how unsteady his voice sounded. "What's the matter? Has something happened to Snape?"

"Not at all," said Draco easily. "I just remembered that you told me about your healing the other day, with warm water, and I thought I'd come and see how you were getting on. Nina told me today that she thinks most of Voldemort's taint is gone from my mind. She'll still See me every day we're here, but the last bits are small now, scattered into the corners of my soul."

"That's wonderful," said Harry, and wished he could sound more enthusiastic. It was hard with Draco staring at him as though he were

a Chocolate Frog. “But—Draco, I’m not comfortable with having you here.” There. Best to be as blunt as possible. A lie would have made things worse. “I want you to leave.”

“Why?” Draco asked. “Were you about to leave?”

“I promised myself to stay here at least an hour,” said Harry. Damn. I don’t think he’ll listen to my reasoning about this as readily as Vera would have. “But then I thought that getting used to this probably isn’t a good idea at any rate. Getting used to being vulnerable? Letting my guard down so far that I might fall asleep?” He shook his head, and pushed some water through his hair. The sensation of it there wasn’t quite as distracting or disgusting as it was on his skin, since he was used to taking showers and getting rain in his hair during Quidditch games, but it gave him something else to focus on. “It’s not something I can adjust to.”

“Harry.”

Harry blinked. He had expected Draco to sound disappointed. Instead, he simply sounded—soft, as if he were trying not to frighten off one of Hagrid’s wilder pets. He rose and circled around Harry. Harry turned in the water immediately, needing to keep an eye on him. This was Draco, of course, whom he loved and trusted, but it was only his mind that said that. His instincts told him that he was in the water, almost naked, and his enemy was on shore, fully clothed and on the higher ground. If Harry couldn’t see him... His shoulders hunched with tension.

“I do want you to relax,” Draco whispered. “Not just on Walpurgis, or the other nights that we do the rituals. There’s going to be plenty of our lives that we share outside the rituals, and where I’ll want you to relax and sleep in my arms. You’ve managed it before. Why not now?”

“We’ve been more equal before,” Harry said. His neck was beginning to ache with the odd angle he had to hold it at. “Both tired, for one thing. Both recovering from mental injuries. Both clothed.” He let that slip out before he could stop himself, and then winced when he saw the expression on Draco’s face. At least, though, if they were going to

have an argument about this, it would distract Draco from thinking about the implications of Harry being unable to relax when they weren't absolutely equal.

No argument was forthcoming. Instead, Draco crouched down on the side of the pool. "Does this help?" he asked.

Some of the tension ebbed out of Harry's neck and shoulders. He was actually able to nod now. "Yes," he said. "It does." Of course, now that he wasn't thinking about Draco threatening him, he had to think about the pool. He shuddered. It felt as if a trail of ants were marching up and down his spine. He started to brace his hand beneath him on the step, to push himself out of the water.

"If I got into the pool with you?" Draco asked, distracting him.

"No." Harry heard the sharp edge of panic in his voice, and Draco apparently heard it, too. He nodded thoughtfully and made a little gesture with his hands. Harry stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Turn around, Harry," Draco murmured. "Let me massage your shoulders. Touch your hair. Perhaps the water alone can't relax you, but a combination of the water and my touch will."

Harry let out a sound that wanted to be a laugh. It didn't quite succeed. "Draco, I don't think I can stop thinking about the fact that I'm mostly naked, and you're not. It would be easier if you'd let me get dressed."

"And if this is another bit of your training that you need to overcome?" Draco cocked his head at him. "I won't do it if you don't want me to, of course, Harry, but I do think we'd have to face it eventually. If you can't trust me to be near you when you're not wearing robes, whom can you trust?"

Sometimes Harry hated not only being reasonable, but having to admit that people on the opposite side of an argument could be reasonable. He turned around slowly, trying to convince himself that the water was not ants and not slime, and really, he should be able to see damn well that it wasn't. He offered his shoulders to Draco,

though they tensed when he heard Draco step in one of the small puddles Harry's turning had flung out of the pool.

"It's all right," Draco whispered in his ear, a moment before his hands touched Harry's shoulders.

It occurred to Harry that if he got his left hand back, he could do this kind of thing to Draco, too. He snorted in spite of himself, in spite of the fact that Draco's fingers rubbing over his bare skin only felt—rough, strange, not good. There's a new motive for wanting my hand back. Revenge on Draco.

"You're at an awkward angle," Draco complained. "Could you move?"

Harry turned and glared at him, though that was hard; he mostly caught a glimpse of blond hair and bowed head. "You could move," he said.

Draco glanced up at him and waited.

Harry realized, then, that shifting position would bring him higher on the step and show off more of his bare skin to Draco. At least, it would if he moved to the right. He could always shift to the left and pretend that he thought that was the direction Draco meant. He sucked in his breath through his nose.

I could. But that just continues the pattern of playing into my training, and I am tired of feeling ants crawling on my skin when I try to take a bath. Perhaps I shouldn't think just in terms of what's useful to the war. Perhaps just wanting something to stop feeling uncomfortable is reason enough.

Reluctantly, he shifted to the right. He heard Draco give a little gasping noise, and wondered why. Perhaps it was just surprise that Harry had done what he asked for. The next moment, his hands dug in more firmly.

Harry tried to concentrate on them and find them pleasurable. Fear of impending discomfort kept his muscles poised on the edge of flight, though, until Draco said, "Wait. This might help." His right hand lifted

from Harry's shoulder, and Harry heard him take out his wand. He murmured an incantation. When his hand returned to its place on Harry's shoulder, it was covered with a soft, warm liquid that smelled like baking bread.

Harry started when Draco began rubbing that into the back of his neck. His muscles loosened under the liquid as they hadn't under the touch of the water—perhaps the greater thickness of it was enough unlike water to fool his training—and the smell of the bread twined all around him. Harry thought he knew why Draco had chosen it; Draco had been with him in the Sanctuary's kitchens the day Harry admitted to enjoying the scent, especially when he didn't think about it as connected to food.

He unwound his muscles, one by one, using the smell as a focal point all the while. He wasn't anywhere dangerous, he tried to persuade himself. He wasn't with anyone who would hurt him. He was in a pleasant place, where house elves or cooks bustled just out of side, preparing bread. In a short time, there would be a tray of food to share, and perhaps a philosophical conversation.

Slowly, slowly, it seemed to work. Harry felt himself sliding a little lower into the pool. It could have been natural gravity. He didn't think it was. And the slime lapping against his sides became—well, water, not the leavings of slugs. He let his head roll back, though he kept his eyes closed. He didn't think he could bear to see Draco's expression right now.

His mind remained oddly focused in the center, a bright point of concentration gathered around the image of himself eating bread and debating an obscure point of the Grand Unified Theory with someone whose face kept changing, but fog crept in from the sides. At one point, Harry would have said the fog was dangerous, and fought to keep his head clear. Now, with the smell and the fact that he knew Draco was the only one in the Relaxation Room, thanks to his magic, he didn't have to.

Besides, he'd felt something like this once before. It was the night Marietta Edgecombe had cast the Blood Whip Curse on him, and he'd had to put up with Draco coaxing him to tell him who it had been.

Harry had nearly succumbed to the haze of what he knew now must have been partially trust and partially arousal. And he hadn't particularly wanted to, knowing Draco would hurt Marietta if he learned her name.

Now, he had no reason to resist it.

His head fell to the side, and this time it was because he really couldn't support it. He had a brief, hazy impression that he should try to keep it out of the pool so he didn't drown, and then he felt cool stone under his cheek. He lay with his head on the side of the pool, then. And the baking bread smell and the warm water and the touches of Draco's hands still ghosted around him, keeping him balanced, fixed on the idea of physical sensations instead of retreating into fear.

He knew he should be afraid, or at least uncomfortable. He kept reaching out to the notion and finding that it fit his mental hand. But whenever he tried to draw the emotion into himself, it faded, into a litany of soft words, a gauntlet of soothing hands.

He felt good. He knew that. But the pleasure had crept up on him just like everything else, slowly, without the sense that he needed to rush into it. Why rush? He had time. No battle tomorrow, no need to speak with others about defense and healing. He could think about the breath traveling in and out of his lungs, if he wanted, and so he did for a few minutes, and noticed that his breaths were deepening, slowing, softening.

It felt so good. It felt—

Did it feel too good?

One of the stroking hands touched the side of his neck, at a place that Harry vaguely knew existed, but couldn't find for himself, and the pleasure briefly sharpened into a spike that made him moan. But the hand retreated again, and when the other ventured around to press in the same place, Harry had no trouble accepting that touch as part of the same hazy, foggy world.

He had no idea how long he drifted like that, the pleasure on the edge of overwhelming him and making him panic, but shifting each time. He had so many things to take into account: the smell, the contrasting sensations of cold stone and warm water, the hands, the words in his ears that sometimes seemed like his name and at other times like endearments, the sight of white and blurred vision when he opened his eyes. Someone had removed his glasses. Harry found that he didn't mind that. He'd let himself retreat into a place where it was all right, and he did trust Draco. As he had said, if Harry wouldn't trust him, who was there?

One thing was missing, though. Delicious smells, soothing touch, dear sound, and acceptable sight, but taste was missing. Harry waited, tracking Draco's progress more with his limp muscles than his eyes, until he was sure that Draco's face was hovering right above his.

Then he opened his mouth.

After a moment's hesitation, Draco obliged him with a kiss.

Harry thought it should not have felt as shattering as it did. After all, he'd been relaxed. And he had heard stories of shattering kisses and heart-breaking declarations of true love, but they belonged in stories, not real life.

This one—this one was break-worthy. It didn't snap the world he'd wrapped himself in, warm and languorous and oh so good, but it did strike down through his mouth as though it were a bolt of lightning striking a tree. Harry felt something in him, one of the barriers of his training most probably, sparkle and simmer and begin to burn, fading to ash in a few moments.

He had thought that things that felt good were wrong, but nothing that felt this good could ever be wrong.

He continued the kiss for a few moments more, then let his head loll back and sighed. A moment later, he was asleep, the blurry white haze in his head moving naturally into elegant darkness.

Draco knew that the spells on the Relaxation Room might have helped Harry into this state of helplessness, just a bit. On the other hand, Harry had told him yesterday that his magic largely erased the effects of those spells. The air of the Sanctuary as a whole was subtle, gentle, and unnoticeable enough to lower his barriers, but it was so concentrated in the Relaxation Room that Harry brought his own magic up as a defense automatically.

He had been tense enough when Draco began to touch him that Draco had feared he would have to stop at any moment. And now Harry was asleep, a faint smile on his face, and Draco only had the urge to keep on touching, to not stop.

He reminded himself sternly that it would be much more fun when Harry was awake to share in the touching that didn't stop, and gently pulled Harry out of the pool, casting a lightening charm on him when his body dragged with unexpected weight. Then he stood up, letting himself notice those details Harry ordinarily frowned at him for noticing: the soft way he drew in his breaths, the way his hand sagged to the side as if he didn't need it ready to cast a spell or hit anyone, the quiet darkness of the lightning bolt scar beneath his fringe. Draco hadn't seen that scar a bright red since the day of Voldemort's defeat, very nearly a month ago now. He took that to mean Harry really was healing, the Sanctuary's distance from the rest of the world cutting off the Dark Lord's attempts to reach him.

If he can reach him, at all. If he's trying. I wouldn't want to try and reach the wizard who cut a hole in my magical core.

Draco made his way gently towards Harry's room. And he let himself remember that, too. The wizard in his arms right now was also the one who had willed a werewolf out of existence because that werewolf was attacking Draco, and had cut a hole in the core of the most powerful Dark Lord to exist in centuries.

Draco didn't know if that was a contradiction, or if he was just lucky that Harry could embody both those extremes and not explode.

He tucked Harry into bed just as he was; he thought Harry deserved to have the sensation of cloth on bare skin, for once. Then he wrote a swift note to leave on the bedside table, detailing some things he'd planned to tell Harry about the next courting ritual but hadn't had time to give him before he fell asleep, and went to fetch Harry's robes, shirt, and trousers.

He felt a deep, quiet satisfaction that seemed to leak into all his limbs, and his head was up, and the morning air smelled fresh and sweet in a way that had nothing to do with the Sanctuary's last three days of heavy rain. Draco wondered if this was what it was like to be in love, and used to it.

Harry tapped his fingers against the sleeve of his robe, and wondered if Draco would come. Then he told himself not to be an idiot. Draco wouldn't have let two broken legs and a broken arm keep him from attending the next ritual in their three-year courtship.

Harry hated to admit, as he paced back and forth in front of the room's golden doors, that he needed this ritual just as much as Draco did. It would make a nice holiday from endless rounds of reasoning with Snape that just pushed him right back into the same corner. Harry was fairly sure the dreams were becoming worse, and that Snape hadn't spoken to anyone about them. That just made him more irritated and defensive, though, and the more he lost control of his emotions, the more determined he became to keep them under lock and key, and the more he lost the ability to do so. It had exploded today with Snape trying to tell Harry that he never wanted to see him again.

Harry had had his own magic repeat the words back to Snape when he was done yelling, and Snape's face had turned the color of old cheese. Harry had told him, quietly, that he knew Snape didn't mean it, and then turned around and left.

It was his and Connor's sixteenth birthday, the thirty-first of July, and, perhaps not coincidentally—Harry thought Draco's selection of this particular form of courtship depended greatly on the dates—the day before the old holiday of Lammas, a quarter of the way around the year from Walpurgis. Harry had noticed a peculiar shine to the

sunlight today. Given what Draco had told him about this particular ritual, that didn't surprise him.

And he had chosen a room in the Sanctuary to celebrate in, since the choice of place was up to him, which reflected the importance of sunlight.

"There you are."

Harry turned with a faint smile. Draco was hurrying down the stairs from the terrace above, fussing and adjusting the collar of his robe. He wore dark blue, the color of starry night, outlined with silver, the color of the moon. Harry wore dark robes as well, but the hem trailed and flashed with gold.

Draco paused and studied him. He nodded. "Good," he said. Then his voice adopted a formal cadence. "We bring the light of stars and moon into our celebration with us, but on this day, perfectly poised between Midsummer and Mabon, both bow before the sun."

Harry saw a faint tracery of fire spring to life in the air next to them, like a lighted candle. In a moment, it raced around them both, enclosing them in a golden circle, away from the rest of the world. He inclined his head to Draco, and stretched out his hand.

"We can celebrate in the light of the sun," he said. "But we can also celebrate by taking the sun into our hearts. Will you come with me, Draco, and bring the sun inside four walls, where it belongs?"

Draco's smile was unexpectedly tremulous. He clasped Harry's hand, and said, "I will."

Harry turned, and raised an eyebrow. The golden doors of the room he'd chosen swung open before them, and he guided Draco inside. Draco hadn't been in this room since Harry had chosen it. That was part of the agreement, in fact; this part of the ritual was under Harry's guidance and control, both because the courted partner had to control it, and because it was his birthday.

He didn't know what he had expected. A room full of mirrors, perhaps, the ones that Harry had told him had helped him find a way to heal his hand. That would be worth their ritual, Draco thought. They would see their true selves reflected amid a myriad of other selves. He was curious to see what kind of worlds his presence standing beside Harry guaranteed or made possible.

Instead, they stepped into a room that at first seemed long, low, and dark. Then Draco realized it probably only felt that way because of the light that shone in the center of it. So intense was its radiance that everything outside it seemed cramped in comparison.

"Come, Draco," Harry whispered, words which weren't part of the ritual but which didn't disrupt it either, and drew him forward.

"What—" Draco broke off as the source of the light came closer. A pool of golden liquid lay in the floor. Draco didn't know why it should have impressed him so much. After all, he'd seen something quite similar, and larger, at Silver-Mirror, the Black family home Harry had inherited when Regulus Black went into the family's portraits. And that pool had bled golden liquid down chains to light lamps, no less.

This pool, though, was wilder. Draco could see that from the curving arcs that leaped from it and fell back down as soft, hot rain. Or perhaps not so soft; the pool's surface parted under their impact, and the drops themselves appeared to sink into deep wells. And dark spots flickered and danced on that surface, too, randomly appearing and disappearing, and Draco could feel the warmth increasing as he approached, so that sweat ran under his formal, heavy wool robes and made him shift uncomfortably.

"What is it?" he whispered to Harry.

Harry gave him a keen glance. "The ritual said you were supposed to trust me."

Draco shut his mouth, and let Harry leave him on the near side of the pool as he paced around to the other. He eventually halted opposite Draco. At that moment, the pool became aware of them.

Draco gasped. He had felt something like this only once before, with the “courting room” at Hogwarts that would show a couple their happiest possible future. There, though, the room’s magic had simply reached out to their minds, drawn forth a possibility, and reflected it.

This was—drawing in. Draco could feel the pool gazing at him, harsh, bright light that irradiated his soul. At the same time, he gazed back into the pool, and found himself falling down enormous wells of unending gold.

“This is a sun-pool,” Harry said, somewhere behind the light. “It embodies a practice of fortune-telling that still exists somewhere in the world; Vera told me the Seers think it’s among wizards in Canada. The Seers are blind to everything except the sun, but they can see the future accurately reflected there, in images instead of prophecies. More accurate than what Trelawney does. And it reflects the actual surface of the sun as it exists, sunspots and explosions and all. I thought, when you told me that we needed to come to a place that would let us see the Light and Dark within ourselves, that it was perfect.”

Draco let out a harsh breath. He still saw nothing except light, so brilliant that he feared what would happen to his eyes when he looked away from the pool. “And does it make us blind to everything except the sunlight?”

“No.” Harry’s voice was gentle, amused. “Look at me, Draco.”

Draco raised his head, blinking hard, and found that he could see perfectly after all, without afterimages. Harry held out his hand.

“This pool works differently, since it’s in the Sanctuary,” Harry murmured. “I suppose there’s not much choice for it. No one here actually practices sun-seeing, and Light magic this powerful tends to interact with other Light magic, like that of the Seers.” He focused on the pool, and Draco saw that his eyes were as wide and unblinking as a cat’s. “Veritas,” he said softly.

The sun-pool began to blaze. Draco had never imagined such a storm of brightness and warmth, and felt his eyes watering. He wondered that he hadn't gone blind already.

Then the sun-pool reached into him again, and pulled something out of him. Draco blinked as he watched a revolving ball come into being above the pool's surface. Part of it was intensely gold, barely visible against the overwhelming sunshine; the other was dark green. As Draco gazed, entranced, the gold and dark green halves separated from each other and drifted a few feet apart. The dark green ball, which Draco knew represented the Dark within himself, was considerably larger than the gold, which represented Light.

Draco failed to see how this was a surprise. He was opening his mouth to tell Harry so when he realized that more balls were blossoming and splitting in the air. Though the dark green ones were always larger, they were not all the same size as the first time. In fact, the fourth pair was nearly identical.

Draco stared across the pool at Harry, waiting for him to explain, only to find him watching with a faint smile. "Those represent the five old definitions of Dark and Light," he explained, without taking his eyes from the hovering masses. "Compulsion and free will is the first one. Then tameness against wildness, truth against deception, cooperation against solitude, and peace against war." His smile widened. "It's no surprise to find that you want to get your own way, and you're willing to lie, fight, and work on your own to get it. It does seem, though, that you're more willing to work with me than you are to tell the truth."

"I swear, Harry, I didn't know I had that much of a predisposition towards compulsion." Draco scowled at the first pair, which could condemn him easily. Harry hated compulsion, after all, and was sworn to destroy it when it came to other species.

"It's all right, Draco," Harry said, as the sun-pool began to pull his own gold and dark green from him. "I should have suspected it, from the possession gift. You're yourself, and at least I know." His eyes shone as he watched, and Draco blinked. He isn't angry at me for this?

Then he asked himself, Would I have been angry at him if I found out that he was Lighter as a result of a magical gift he couldn't help?

No. Of course not.

And if he was going to ask Harry to trust him at his most vulnerable, he really ought to be able to trust Harry with the truths of his suddenly revealed soul. So he devoted himself to watching as Harry's own gold and dark green separated and revealed his true nature—at least as predicated on the terms of a system Draco thought insufficiently advanced. Dark and Light were both more complicated than those old pairs of dualisms, and Draco was all for free will, as long as it didn't intrude too much on what he was doing.

The pairs of Harry's suns arranged themselves. The golden one was larger in the first—no surprise, Draco thought, with Harry's love of letting others do as they wanted. By contrast, the dark green ball of the second dwarfed the gold, indicating Harry's wildness. The third and fourth pairs were almost balanced. Draco nodded. Harry had used everything from glamours to cooperative rituals in the past to help his war effort and vates work along. Draco was actually relieved to see that Harry didn't want to hare off on his own that much anymore.

The last pair was the one he was really interested in, though. He didn't know if Harry was desperate to keep peace, or if he would go to war. And the sun-pool itself seemed undecided. The pair of gold and dark green orbited each other for a good two minutes before they broke apart.

The dark green ball was slightly larger.

Draco blinked at Harry, who nodded back to him, his mouth set in a thin line.

"That's another decision I made and thought you should know about," said Harry. "I don't like the idea of it. I would much rather accomplish everything I have to do by peaceful methods." He cocked his head at the sun-pool. "But that measures not only intent, but emotions, rationality, and will. And it knows that I have the will to carry a war or

a revolution forward, if it's the only way." He let out a shuddering breath. "And I think it is."

Draco shook his head, and then walked around the pool with rough steps. They had seen each other as they were. Harry had done his part in this ritual, arranging that. Draco could hug him if he wanted to, and he did, burying his face in Harry's neck and breathing deeply of his scent.

Harry embraced him back, sounding a bit bewildered. "Draco, are you well?"

"I didn't know if you would find it in you to go to war again, after killing those children," Draco whispered. The scent of sweat tickled his nose. At least he knew Harry hadn't been entirely unaffected by the heat inside the room. "I thought you might be broken, and I'd have to coax you along."

Harry let out a heavy sigh. "I still hate the idea of it," he said. "That's a wound that will never totally heal. But I have to work on healing it while pushing the war forward at the same time. And—I've decided that I can't let myself be pushed by fear of anything, Draco, not when fear is the only driving motive. That means that if, say, the Ministry uses violence against the werewolves, and they aren't only trying to imprison those who bit others or defend innocents, I have to push back. They can only go so far and no further."

"Do you know how long I've been waiting to hear you say those words?" Draco whispered into his ear, working his hands beneath Harry's robes.

"Why those words?" Harry's voice had gone slightly breathy.

"Because," Draco said, lifting his head to catch Harry's eyes, "it means that you finally trust yourself enough to use your power the way it should be used. Not to rule the world, no, and not to manipulate everyone the way Dumbledore tried to do. But you can fight for what you believe in, and you don't think it's unfair anymore that you're a Lord-level wizard and most of your opponents aren't."

Harry smiled faintly. "No, I don't." He tilted his head. "I'm ready to fight, Draco, and ready to use my magic to back up what I say."

Draco laughed aloud. There was still some of the ritual left to go, a few promises to one another, and of course he had to give Harry his birthday gift, but he was thinking more, at the moment, about the sensation lifting and expanding in his chest, a soaring sunrise or a phoenix.

Finally. Fucking finally he'll be what he always should have been. Not a Lord in name, but he'll fight for what he wants. And he'll change the world if people insist on being stupid and not changing it themselves. And he'll show anyone who underestimates him what he really is.

He met Harry's eyes, and grinned. He knew it was a vicious smile, but Harry seemed to take it in the spirit in which it was given, because he returned it.

Draco barely contained the urge to howl like a werewolf. And I'll be right there fighting at his side.

Interlude: The Outer World

June 30th, 1996

Dear Harry:

I won't send this letter to you, because you need to heal without being troubled by the outside world, as Peter puts it, and anyway, the owl would take weeks to get through the shadows. But I wanted to write it anyway. It smoothes me out, gives me a sense of balance to be able to pretend I'm talking to you, even if you can't talk back. I can imagine you nodding and watching me, and that helps.

I'm all settled into Lux Aeterna now, and Peter came with me. I can't believe how different the wards are, now that the house is linked to me instead of to, you know, the earth. I think it's calmer. It doesn't snap at everyone and have wards stalk everywhere the way it did when it belonged to James. I can be angry and not have the house get angry with me. I think that's a huge improvement.

The first day here, I explored some of the hidden corridors and the doors we couldn't open when James owned the house, and I showed Peter the room I'd found the sword in. You remember, the sword I used in the battle that talked to me and muffled my thoughts so I could kill? You didn't like it. I still think it's useful.

But Peter didn't like it, either. He frowned and shook his head at the room, and asked me why I thought our ancestors, whoever they were, blocked the room off. I told him I didn't know. Maybe they just wanted to keep the sword from falling into the hands of anyone unworthy?

Peter said, "The sword's dangerous."

"Well, of course it is," I said. "It can kill people."

Peter turned and looked at me. You know me, Harry, I don't have the best memory; I leave that for Hermione. But I remember the way he looked at me, and the exact words he spoke.

“And that’s the reason you think it’s dangerous?” he asked. His voice had gone all soft, like he thought he had something to tell me.

I scowled at him and said—I remember the exact words because I was so angry—“If you mean that I should think it’s dangerous because of the compulsion, then yes, I also think it’s dangerous for that reason, too. I had Tom Riddle in my head for five months and Voldemort himself teaching me compulsion, even if I didn’t know. I know that things like that are dangerous. But it could kill people both ways. It stabs them with its blade, and it could kill their free wills by putting its compulsion in their heads. I know what’s that like, Peter. I might not have seen physical battle very much yet, but I’ve seen lots of mental battlefields.”

That’s something I’ve never really tried to describe to anyone, you know, Harry—the five months I spent trapped behind my own eyes because Tom Riddle was in my head and I couldn’t tell anyone about it. I hate him. I want him dead. I don’t care if you kill him or someone else does. I just want him gone and dead.

Peter’s told me to leave some of the rooms in Lux Aeterna alone for now, and he’s started training me in dueling again, picking up where Snape left off. He’s a lot better at it, and you can tell the git I said so. For one thing, Peter’s Declared for Light, so he doesn’t think Light spells are stupid or weak the way Snape does. And he showed me this spell the other day that was brilliant. I can’t wait to show it to you.

I love you, and I hope the summer’s been good to you so far, even though I can’t send this letter and so I can’t receive an actual reply.

Love,

Connor.

The Daily Prophet July 2nd, 1996

YOU-KNOW-WHO WOUNDED BEYOND REPAIR, SOURCES HINT

By: Melinda Honeywhistle

Aurors have been unable to locate the hiding place of You-Know-Who since he faced the Boy-Who-Lived in battle, sources confirm.

"I think he's really gone, this time," said an Auror who wished to remain anonymous. "He should have left some trace of a magical footprint if he wasn't. A Dark Lord doesn't just contain his magic like that. And we can't find one."

Others were not so sure.

"I don't wish to judge the fine efforts of our most noble Aurors as lacking, of course," said Aurora Whitestag, 45, who lost both her son and daughter in the Midsummer battle at Hogwarts. She wore a polite smile throughout the interview with this reporter, but it was clear that she was worried. "But I don't think the matter is quite that simple. We knew, last time, that the Dark Lord had fallen. It was obvious from the way the Death Eaters reacted, if nothing else. But this time, most of the Death Eaters were slaughtered, and we can't find any to ask. I don't think we should confirm him gone until we see what his servants think of their master's absence."...

From: the Department of Magical Law Enforcement

Dated: July 4th, 1996

Purpose: Creation of a new department

Dear Minister,

This is to confirm the creation of a new department in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Called the Tracking Division, this department will concentrate solely on the hunting and capture of those wizards who have used more than two years worth of Dark magic continuously. Their primary targets will be Death Eaters still in hiding, as You-Know-Who must have left some sleeper agents in the ranks of the free and perhaps even in the ranks of the Light, rather like former Headmaster of Durmstrang Karkaroff. Other Dark wizards will be of lesser priority, but still fall within the Tracking Division's purview. Several former workers from all Departments, including Unspeakables, have already volunteered for the Division, and its

funding will be supported by concerned citizens as well as the usual Ministry vaults. Enclosed please find detailed plans for such funding and a tentative list of the Division's first members.

Amelia Bones,

Head, Department of Magical Law Enforcement.
From: Minister of Magic's office

Dated: July 4th, 1996

Re: Purpose: Creation of a new department

Amelia,

I know where your funding comes from, and who your main target would actually be. The presence of many people on your roster from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures rather clinches it. Do stop trying to push werewolf hunts through my office when you should be working on the capture of actual Death Eaters.

This proposal is rejected.

Rufus Scrimgeour,

Minister of Magic.

The Daily Prophet July 7th, 1996

FORMER HARRY POTTER: DANGER OR HERO?

By: Domitian Peaseblossom

A petition currently circulating among the wizards of Britain stands the chance of redefining one of the youngest wizarding heroes ever to live—at least if Philip Willoughby has his way.

“My daughter died in the attack on Hogwarts,” Willoughby, 34, said on Tuesday. “But she didn’t die because of You-Know-Who.” (It should be noted that Mr. Willoughby did in fact use the name of You-Know-Who, but this reporter could not in good conscience print it). “She died because Harry Potter—and yes, that was his name, I think it’s ridiculous that children are just allowed to abandon the legacy of their parents whenever they want—killed her.”

Though this very paper reported that news some days ago, this is the first sign that some parents are not just sitting back and accepting the deaths as a necessity of war.

“I am circulating a petition among all the parents I know,” said Willoughby. He is a Muggle, but he has immersed himself in the wizarding world, he says, and has many contacts among parents in his daughter Alexandra’s House. “And they’ll send it out to others. What Harry Potter did was murder. If we excuse it in the name of war, what else are we excusing? Terrible tragedies were committed in Muggle wars throughout history because someone thought one murder, one exception, was a good idea. And then there came tons of other exceptions.”

The petition is a demand that Harry stand trial for war crimes. Willoughby hopes to gather enough signatures to force the Ministry to pay attention.

“We need to retain our moral compass in this war,” he said at the end of the interview. “If we don’t, then we’re no better than our enemies.”....

July 8th, 1996

Dear Harry:

The stupidest thing is happening. One of the parents of one of the children you killed is circulating a petition, trying to collect signatures and demand that you be tried for war crimes.

I set the paper on fire when I read about it. I didn't even think, just cast Incendio, and then there were a bunch of drifting ashes all over the kitchen. Peter looked at me severely, but I think that's just because he hadn't had a chance to read it yet. I don't think that he really disagreed with me.

We obtained another copy of the Prophet, and yes, it's true. Peter was angrier than I've ever seen him before. He went off by himself for a little while. When he came back, he looked smug. I asked him what he'd done, and he just grinned at me and asked why I thought he'd done anything. I told him that he was a Marauder, but that was a mistake, because then he started thinking about James and Sirius and Remus.

Remus wrote me a letter the other day. I didn't read most of it. He told me that he missed me, but then he started talking about you. And—it's sickening, Harry. I think he really believes that you should just help the werewolves and do nothing else, like there aren't other people who are suffering. He accused you of dithering and dragging your feet. That letter got lit on fire, too.

I asked Peter today if he'd show me the basics of the Animagus transformation. He seemed startled, and told me that it would take a long time, especially since he knows that I don't have the same kind of talent at Transfiguration that he does. I told him that was all right. He did mention that part of the reason it took him and James and Sirius so long is that they had to work on it on the sly; they didn't want anyone finding out why they were trying to become Animagi, after all! They couldn't just collect ingredients for the potions openly, and it took them months to learn some of the meditation techniques that you could pick up in just a few weeks if you were working with an instructor out in the open. So it might take me two years, but Peter thinks I can master it, since I have him as a teacher. He did insist that I talk to Headmistress McGonagall when we went back to school and tell her what I was doing. Well, of course.

He started me on the meditation techniques today. I asked him what I should think about. He told me that I need to know my own soul first, and that will guide me towards my form. Once I know what my form is, then I can aim at it and achieve the transformation that much faster.

He added that I have to accept the form, too. It took him longer to learn to change because he hated being a rat, at first. He hated what that said about him.

I thought about what a dog and a stag said about Sirius and James, and decided that Animagus forms aren't always right.

I don't know my own soul yet. This is going to take a long time.

Parvati came and visited yesterday. We spent hours talking about nothing, and kissing, and—other things that you probably don't want to hear about, I'm sure, because, let's face it, they're things that I wouldn't want to hear about if you and Draco were doing them.

I know you don't know her very well yet, Harry, and she doesn't know you very well. But I can tell you this here, since I won't ever send you this letter (and there's no way in hell she'll ever know I'm writing it, either). I really like her. She's so normal. She chatters and giggles about her clothes and her friends, and sometimes she has a tantrum, and she doesn't understand Hermione any better than I do most of the time—though I think I understand Hermione more often than she does—and she hugged me when she heard about the battle and what I did, and she owled Lavender Brown with sweets the other day because she heard that she was sick and wanted to make her feel better. And she fights with Padma all the time.

She's real. I think my life's gone mad sometimes, and then she's there, and I'm sure she likes me, too—she wouldn't tell me she did if she didn't, she's not that kind of girl—and she never even blinked when she found out that I wasn't the Boy-Who-Lived. I just really, really like Parvati, Harry.

Maybe you can get to know her better this year at school?

I have to stop writing now. Peter wants to talk to me about something. See you at the end of August, I suppose.

Love,

Connor.

The Quibbler July 11th, 1996
RATS INVADE DAILY PROPHET OFFICES

By: Julian Lovegood

In incontrovertible evidence of the Daily Prophet's involvement in the Rotfang Conspiracy, rats invaded the newspaper's offices yesterday. They appeared to come from nowhere, and the Daily Prophet's owners claim that there was no effort to summon them. "They simply appeared!" was the common wail. They caused great damage, including eating all printed copies of the newspapers ready for today, before departing as mysteriously as they had come.

Alert Quibbler readers, of course, will realize that the involvement of rats points directly to the Prophet's entanglement with the Rotfang Conspiracy, which already includes Aurors, Wrackspurt deniers, and hunters of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks...

The Daily Prophet July 13th, 1996

Are you looking for excitement? Are you tired of being told that you can't have a voice in the world as it is? Do you have things to SAY and no one to HEAR you?

Owl Dionysus Hornblower now! The Maenad Press is gathering interested writers. Whether you write letters, articles, reports, memoirs, or simply opinions, contact us and lift your VOICE!

July 15th, 1996

Dear Harry:

I'm just writing another quick note—that will never go to you, of course—because I'm frightened and can't go back to sleep. (And

actually, I'm not sure of the dating. It could be the sixteenth now for all I know, it's so late at night.)

I woke with this itchy feeling on the back of my neck. It took me a minute to realize it was the wards. Someone was outside Lux Aeterna, leaning on them, trying to find a way to slip through.

I went and woke up Peter at once, of course. I might have gone after it on my own two years ago, but I've learned better since then. You've been a wonderful example, big brother, both of what to do and what not to do.

Peter went with me to the edge of the wards. We saw a figure in a dark cloak there. I thought it was a Death Eater. Peter reminded me that most of the Death Eaters were dead, and anyway it would be stupid for someone to wear robes that would make people think "Death Eater" if he really was. He thought that he had his hood pulled up so that we couldn't see his face and recognize him.

...He thinks it was Remus, Harry. He really does. This wizard was trying to break the wards down, and get to us, and probably harm us, and Peter thinks it was Remus. I think it could be another werewolf. Peter's absolutely convinced, though, and I've never seen him both so sad and so angry. He's been locked up in his bedroom writing since we came back inside. I don't know if it's a letter like this one, that will never get sent, or whether he really intends to owl Remus.

I feel kind of strange about that. I mean, Remus is my godfather (unless he's not allowed to be any more, with the new Ministry laws against werewolves having any kind of custody over children). I don't think he would hurt me. But Peter does. He's absolutely convinced of it.

Nothing happened though, really. The wards flared for me when I tried to see the wizard's face, and he immediately Apparated away. No word, no familiar gestures. If we know him, I couldn't see it.

It does make me think of an odd owl I got the other day, though. It didn't have anything with it but a silver Snitch. Peter wouldn't let me

touch it. It was a Portkey. Where would it have taken me? I have no idea.

Peter thinks someone's hunting me. He thinks Remus wants to take me and hold me hostage, to use against you.

I think Peter's paranoid. Other than that, I don't know what to think.

I can't see straight anymore. I'm going to bed. Good night, Harry.

Love,

Connor.

The Daily Prophet July 17th, 1996

HOGWARTS HEADMISTRESS DEFENDS HIRING CHOICES

By: Rita Skeeter

A storm of controversy burst upon the British wizarding world yesterday when Hogwarts Headmistress Minerva McGonagall revealed, at the request of parents, her choices for professors at the prestigious school this year.

McGonagall has hired two new professors, one for Defense Against the Dark Arts and one for Transfiguration. Acies Merryweather, the last Defense professor, changed into a dragon and vanished rather spectacularly, continuing the tradition of Defense professors not lasting longer than a year at Hogwarts, which some whisper is a curse.

Many, however, do not find her choice of formerly accused Death Eater Peter Pettigrew for new Defense professor very reassuring.

"It's a disgrace, is what it is," Peter Willoughby, 34, said. His daughter Alexandra died in the attack on Hogwarts in June, and since then he has been circulating a petition trying to bring Harry, the Boy-Who-

Lived and the Young Hero, to trial for war crimes. "How much danger is she going to put our children in?"

Other criticism was more measured, but still audible. "As long as the Aurors are certain he's innocent, of course," said Sita Patil, 36, yesterday. Her twin daughters, Padma and Parvati, 16, both attend the school, and Padma fought in the Battle of Hogwarts on Midsummer Day. "I'm terribly proud of my daughters and what they've accomplished so far, but that was against outside threats. Experience has shown that threats coming from inside the school are much more insidious."

Headmistress McGonagall has stood firm in her decision to hire Pettigrew, who was already acting Head of Gryffindor House at the end of last year.

"Peter was a Gryffindor himself," she told this reporter. "And he was a soldier in the First War against You-Know-Who. He's a fighter, and he's a fine teacher. I've seen him working with students myself. I have no doubts whatsoever about my choice to hire him. It's about time that more of the British wizarding world acknowledged his innocence, as a matter of fact."

Her second choice has not stirred as much disquietude, though the selection of a relatively young and inexperienced woman for the post, Hilda Belluspersona, has inspired some questions.

Once again, Headmistress McGonagall is firm in her principles. "I can recognize Transfiguration talent when I see it," she told this reporter. "I ought to be able to, since I was Transfiguration professor at Hogwarts for several decades. I would not endanger my students, especially in a time of war, by giving them less than a competent teacher."

Belluspersona, who is said to be preparing busily for her first year in such a demanding job, was unavailable for comment.

The Bird-gazer July 21st, 1996

“Your Weekly Eye on the Magical Skies since 1957”

Increased Sea Eagle Sightings Over Britain's Coasts

We report with pleasure the return of a magnificent bird to our shores: the sea eagle. This raptor can be distinguished from others by its wedge-shaped tail and immense size, as in the photograph immediately below this report. Sea eagles have traditionally rarely nested in magical areas, as they are in direct competition with several other species, but so frequent have the sightings been of late—though always of a solitary bird, flying alone—that some readers have begun to hope that is changing, and British wizards might soon see some nesting pairs.

July 23rd, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

Once again, this must be short. I apologize, but snatching time for writing these letters, and doing the necessary research, has become more and more difficult lately. I suspect my father is arranging a marriage for me, or otherwise hatching a plan that involves me. And if I dare to show any defiance to him, then he will break my wand and stuff me full of Dreamless Sleep Potion until he can locate a potion that will break my mind and put me under his control permanently.

I asked you in my last letter if you had ever heard of Falco Parkinson. I asked that for a very good reason. Falco Parkinson was the mentor of Albus Dumbledore. He was also, at one time, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, and several other things. Many well-researched books report that he died, and the authors all think each other wrong in their reports of how. Many more think him nothing but a myth.

He is not a myth. He is alive. I overheard my parents speaking of him more than once. He is the one who began the Order of the Phoenix, or at least gave Albus Dumbledore the idea for it. I fear it is to him that the members of the Order are turning in the wake of Dumbledore's fall, hoping to gain prominence for the Light.

I have managed to learn little about him other than his age and his power, both immense. However, this I can tell you: He is an Animagus, and his form is a sea eagle. It may be possible to prevent him from spying on you with that information, as I know there are wards that can be tuned to sense the presence of a single feather of a certain kind of bird, or even to shut spying Animagi out of conversations altogether. I hope that you can find a use for this information.

Once again, please do not try to owl me back. My father is a fanatic for the Light. That I have managed to write you two letters so far and not get caught is a miracle. But fear has kept me silent long enough. I will continue to write, as long as I can, and hope to see my family be of true benefit to society, instead of the tangled tree of obsessed Light zealots they currently are.

Sincerely,

The Liberator.

July 28th, 1996

Dear Headmistress McGonagall:

I am sorry for writing this letter to you, but I did not know where else to send it. I had not realized that having Harry out of contact with us for two months would prove to be such a problem.

My name is Gerald MacFusty, and I assist my clan in managing the preserve of Britain's native Hebridean Blacks. Harry approached us for information about the British Red-Gold dragon who has suddenly come into the world, the immense female who used to be Acies Lestrangle, in late June. She had settled on an isle not far from our dragons, apparently drawn and soothed and calmed by their presence, and gone into what we thought was a starvation sleep. We expected this to last two to three months, after which she would wake ravenously hungry.

It appears that our information on British Red-Golds was spotty; it has been centuries since this breed went extinct. She has woken and flown. Her flight was out to sea, and slow, as though she were searching for something. We believe that her hunger will drive her to feed on the largest prey she can find, likely whales, but we do not know where she will go after that.

If you are in contact with Harry, please tell him the news. A few of our Dragon-Keepers approached her as she woke, and could not hold her. Her mind is wild, like a surging storm at sea, beyond anything we have encountered.

We will pass the warning along the coasts of Britain and Ireland, and hope that will suffice.

Yours in hope,

Gerald MacFusty.

July 30th, 1996

Dear Harry:

I wish there was a way I really could send this letter to you. I'm so frightened right now. Yes, I admitted I was frightened. That's fine. This is a private letter that no one else is ever going to see, rather like a private diary. I can say that I'm afraid here, and as long as it doesn't paralyze me and prevent me from doing what has to be done, then it's all right.

We received the Daily Prophet this morning, the way we always do, and Peter got it first. He spat his porridge out. I asked him what the matter was, and he passed the paper over to me without a word.

Harry—they're hunting werewolves. The Ministry got a department formed somehow, on a technicality, that's allowed to do it. They've killed two of them already. The photograph on the front page of the

Prophet was of a hunter holding up two scalps, one of them white and one of them brown.

That's when I realized that no matter how angry Peter is at Remus, he still loves him. He conjured a Patronus—his is an image of a shining tree—and sent it out as a message to Remus. He explained to me, when I asked, that the Order of the Phoenix used to do that all the time when they had to speak to each other, fast, and owls wouldn't do. Then he started pacing around the kitchen.

My throat hurt. I wondered what would happen if no message came back, and then I wondered what would happen if we received an owl saying that Remus was dead.

I sat with my head in my hands for a while. That's all I really remember.

Then a Patronus came back. It was a wolf, which I suppose shouldn't have been a surprise. It ran in a circle around Peter, and his face grew calmer as I watched. He let out a long sigh and looked at me.

"He's all right," he said.

I nodded, and then went upstairs so that I could write this letter.

It's started, Harry. The storm's started. It's strange that I never really felt that way before. I mean, there was the storm of Light at Hogwarts, and the storm of the Dark on Midwinter when the Light came up and asked that I give you some power if I was loyal to you. And Voldemort came back even before that, and tried to come back three other times. There have been all sorts of times when the world could have changed, at least for us if not for everyone in the outer world.

But I've never felt this way before, like there's a storm blowing around me and a war coming, and everything's trembling on the verge of a fall.

I hope you come home soon, Harry. I know that you need the time to heal, really need it, but we need you here, too. You're the phoenix who can sing us through the storm.

Love,

Connor.

Chapter Four: Recalled From Exile

“Any luck?”

Harry shook his head and leaned back on Draco’s couch, clasping his hand and his stump together behind his head. He tried to concentrate on his wrist, to determine if there really was less of a feeling of magic there after he had broken the first of Bellatrix’s curses, but his irritation distracted him. “No. The magic is the same as the magic in Woodhouse—a smooth current, and it circles the room, and when I do something to alter the walls, the magic puts it back together. But I can’t get its attention, any more than I can get the attention of the magic in Woodhouse.” He frowned at the ceiling. “I am starting to think that we’ll need the Black family libraries on this after all. The Sanctuary can only demonstrate place magic, not how it works.”

Draco laughed quietly.

“What is it?” Harry rolled over and looked at him curiously.

“I’m comparing my memories of you a year ago to the way you are now,” said Draco. “And you’re doing much better now than you were then.”

“Of course I am,” said Harry, wondering why this was remarkable enough to make Draco’s eyes shine and his lips curve. He drew out his wrist and showed it to Draco. “I haven’t just had my left hand removed, and my parents haven’t just been arrested by my git of a guardian whom I no longer trust.”

“Do you trust him now?” And the humor was gone from Draco’s face, his eyes narrowing. “Because I’m not sure I do.”

Harry sighed and pulled his hand out from behind his head to pinch his nose. “That’s a complicated question.”

“No, it’s not.” Draco leaned forward on his chair and drummed out the words on his knees, an impact of fingers for every one. “Do. You. Trust. Snape?”

“Yes and no,” said Harry, tilting his head to look up at the ceiling again. It was carved with deep patterns that it had taken Harry a while to notice, since the shifting shadows were prone to conceal them, and the Sanctuary had had enough rainy weather in the past few weeks that the afternoon sunlight rarely reached that far into a room. Now, he watched a sea serpent coiling around a rock and spitting a tongue of clouds and water at ships. He wondered if that was real, or some artist’s rendering of a dragon half-submerged in water. “I know why he’s reacting the way he is, and I trust him not to want to hurt me.”

“But?” Draco pushed.

“You’re pushing,” Harry told him.

Draco laughed shortly. “Yes, and last summer I didn’t dare, except when you risked your life,” he said. “But this is different now, Harry. You’re not a fragile statue that will topple over and break at the slightest shove. You can take and grasp what I’m telling you now, and it’s important. Now, tell me.”

Harry bit his lip for a moment, then said, “But I don’t know if I can trust him not to be a liability by the time we return from the Sanctuary. Perhaps I should tell Professor McGonagall to search for a new Potions Professor for at least the first term.”

“And a new Head of Slytherin House?” Draco had tensed.

“I don’t know.” Harry swept his hand through his hair, absently massaging his scar. It hadn’t hurt, exactly, since he had come here, but it did tingle when he was dreaming. There were plenty of dreams of crawling through dirt tunnels, as though the place where Voldemort had taken refuge after his wounding were underground. “But I think I need to think about what’s best for him, Draco. Not whether he can heal by a particular date. And if that means his staying here because he can’t keep his calm in the outer world...” He shrugged. “That’s what’s best.”

“You sound like he did last year,” Draco murmured.

Harry sighed. "He won't have a trial with the people who hurt him. I'm no longer sure that's a good or a bad thing." He was about to add something else, but he turned his head curiously. From the sounds outside, the quick slap of bare feet, someone was approaching Draco's room at almost a run. He wondered if it was Nina; Draco had said they didn't have a soul-cleansing session today, but she might have forgotten.

The door burst open a moment later, and Vera came in. Harry stared. Agitation seemed wrong on her face, as if it were a mask someone else had fastened on her features.

She held a letter in one hand.

Harry felt a wind blow across him from a long distance away, the kind of wind, he thought, that turned water to ice. He sat up and held out his hand for the letter, and Vera gave it to him without thought.

Or perhaps it wasn't without thought. When Draco asked a question, she turned to answer him in a low voice.

Harry read. The handwriting on the letter was distinctly unfamiliar, and it was dated today, the first of August.

Dear sisters and brothers:

Normally, I would ask your permission months or weeks before bringing someone through the shadows, but I consider this situation urgent. I have never Seen someone's soul change so quickly in the course of a few hours. If we wait, then I fear we may lose him. So I send this owl on the swiftpath through the shadows, because this is an emergency.

My wandering feet had led me to the Isle of Man, and the Opalline family. I was staying a few days with them, and conversing with one of the daughters of the family, whom her father feared was succumbing to a sense of uselessness. This was the last day I meant to spend with them, since the wounds in the daughter's soul were small, and did not require a visit to the Sanctuary.

A dragon came from the sky three hours ago. I have never seen anything like her: red-gold, female, with wings vaster than the earth.

Harry had to stop reading and close his eyes for a moment there. Acies.

Or what is left of her. She's not human any more.

He opened his eyes and continued reading.

The Opallines think she was drawn by their home, Gollrish Y Thie, which is the skeleton of an immense dragon of her breed. They also think she went mad when she realized that the skeleton was dead, and perhaps even made the connection that the Opallines had killed her. One cannot tell, however. Dragons will go mad simply because their wills are balked.

She breathed fire. Two dozen of the Opallines died in a few instants. If the Opalline heir, Calibrid, had not been on the Isle and summoned all the magic of her family to her, then I think more of them would have perished. But she managed to summon it, and compel the dragon into sleep.

However, she lost a sense of her own danger during the moments in which she summoned the magic, and the fire would have reached her. Her brother Doncan, trained to protect and guard her, cast his body and his magic into the way of the flames.

He survived, instead of being vaporized, but his body is so badly burned that his family can do little for him. The fire also took his sight, and has inflicted deep wounds on his soul. He believes now that his survival does not matter, because he will not be able to defend his sister in the way he has become accustomed to doing. He tried to commit suicide in the first moments after being assured that Calibrid was still alive.

I stopped him, and I will be bringing him to the Sanctuary along the swiftpath. I know that Joseph has studied physical healing techniques that may benefit him. But teaching him to live with his burns will mean nothing if we cannot also reconcile him to life. I am sorry that I do not

have time to ask formal permission. If you think it proper, I will serve whatever penalty the brothers and sisters choose.

In distress,

Calla.

Harry glanced up from the letter. Vera was watching him with tense lines around the corners of her eyes, and Harry frowned. She looked concerned for him—he knew that expression by now—which did not make any sense.

“He’s coming here?” he asked, to begin the conversation.

Vera nodded. “I wanted to warn you,” she said, “because Doncan does need the Sanctuary, but I did not want you to have no warning of his coming, and blame yourself when he arrived.”

“I don’t blame myself,” Harry said shortly, giving her back the letter. “People I trusted told me Acies would sleep until we returned to the wizarding world. They seem to have been wrong, but I don’t think anyone really understands the magic that transformed Acies. I don’t know why she became a British Red-Gold instead of one of the living species of dragon.” He shook his head, and tugged his mind back to more important matters. “When will Doncan arrive?”

“Calla may have to convince his family, still, but she is right in that they can do little for him on the Isle of Man,” Vera murmured, frowning at Harry. “And they will have their own psychological wounds to soothe, from the deaths of so many of their family. So he should arrive in no more than a few hours, a day at the most.”

Harry nodded. “And she isn’t sure he will want to live?”

“That is true.”

“I can help,” said Harry firmly. “I know I can. I went through a warped version of the same training Doncan chose. I know what it’s like when the center of my universe starts swinging around and changing, and I

realize I won't be able to protect it perfectly any more." He held Vera's eyes. "He's a guardian, the same as I am."

Vera's shoulders went up. "You realize that he may not want to speak to you?"

Harry snorted. "Of course I do. On the other hand, he didn't want to live and come to the Sanctuary, either, and Calla's bringing him here. I think there's at least a chance he may want to speak to me. He's met me before, and he knows the similarities we share. He acknowledged them himself."

"And if I say," Vera asked, her voice low, and clear as clear water, "that I do not think you should be involved in attempting to heal his soul, when you are still struggling to heal yourself?"

Harry folded his arms. "I would say that helping others is one of the ways I heal," he said, dropping his voice into the frosty politeness that had won his way with his Dark allies when he first met them. "I would be sorry to act against your wishes, but I am not so fragile that I need absolute isolation from any other person who is hurt. I've been helping Professor Snape, you know."

Vera stared at him, and Harry blinked. "You didn't know," he said. Why did I think she did? I suppose she never was there during the times when Snape and I talked or argued, because our sessions are always private, and she has her own life to lead otherwise.

"That burden should not have been left up to you," said Vera, her voice even lower now with distress. "I knew he had refused Joseph's help. I did not know he had decided to make you his Seer in Joseph's place."

Harry could feel himself start to scowl. "There are lots of burdens that shouldn't have been left up to me," he said sharply. "But they were, and that's the way it is. I want to help. I can help. I have all this immense strength floating around, and I'm doing nothing with it. And Snape has at least tacitly agreed to let me help, because he talks to me. So why can't I help Doncan, if he agrees to the same thing?"

"You should not have to," said Vera. She kept shaking her head, as if that would make the things she didn't like cease to exist. "You cannot heal if you must be constantly made to carry the burdens of others, Harry."

"Is that something you See from my soul?" Harry leaned forward. "Or just received wisdom that you're quoting?"

Vera stared at him.

"I thought so," Harry said. "I know it probably does sound strange to you, Vera, because you help lots of other people who do need absolute isolation from the world around them, and peace, to heal. That's not me, that's all." He shrugged. "I wasn't raised normally, and I haven't had a normal life since the time I was eleven. Why should I be normal in this, either?"

"I wanted to give you a chance to be normal." Vera's eyes were bright with grief. "I did not want to force you to help others who should be able to survive with the help of Seers, or on their own."

Harry let himself soften, because he knew from her words that he had won. "It's not fair," he said. "I'll grant you that. But I don't really think there's such a thing as fair unless people make it up and defend it. So I can help with Doncan, if he agrees that he wants my help?"

"If he agrees," said Vera, still staring at him.

"Of course," said Harry, puzzled and a bit offended that she would think he would barge into Doncan's room to speak to him if Doncan refused to see Harry.

"And perhaps we will speak tomorrow about whether you will ever think of yourself first, instead of others," said Vera, and strode for the door.

Harry watched her go, thoughtfully. So she doesn't understand everything, even after Seeing my soul. I suppose she thinks there's no way I can work on my healing and the healing of someone else at the same time. But that's not true. And she was pleased with my

progress until now, and I've been helping Snape for part of that progress.

"Harry."

Warily, Harry turned to face his boyfriend. He was not sure whether Draco would approve of this or not. Of course, Draco was not actually in a position to enforce his will on Harry, either.

"Will it ever end?" Draco asked, his voice tired.

Harry knew the answer to that. He went over to the chair and leaned down, wrapping his arms around Draco's shoulders and pressing a kiss to his temple. "No," he whispered. "I told you that after Greyback and Whitecheek, remember? It doesn't end. Life doesn't stop moving while you try to learn to live it. I was foolish to think that I could retreat for two months and nothing would happen. I tried to arrange things so that nothing would, but that's not the way the world works."

"But you don't feel guilty for Doncan's getting burned?" Draco held his hand and searched his eyes.

Harry let out a surprised little laugh. "No. I made the decision to leave based on good evidence, or what I thought was good evidence. You don't need to worry about that, Draco. I'm not doing this to punish myself. Guilt doesn't help as much as genuine determination to aid someone else." He started to pull his hand out of Draco's.

"Do you know—" Draco began, and stopped.

Harry waited.

"Do you know," Draco continued after a moment, his voice even lower than Vera's had been, "I thought that someday, this would be done with? I was picturing us living in an isolated house—not in Britain, even, because people would never stop seeking you out to help them as long as we were in Britain. Maybe Ireland. Maybe Australia, or America, or some other place where they spoke English. Just living there, and our biggest concern would be about fights we had or

whether the meat we bought was spoiled.” He laughed. “That was stupid, wasn’t it?”

Harry smiled. “That wasn’t stupid, Draco. Just unrealistic. And dreams are supposed to be unrealistic.” He gently laid his hand on the back of Draco’s neck until he tilted his head to look up, and then kissed him, slowly and thoroughly and with as much love as he could muster. He still didn’t think he was normal enough to convey all his emotions through his body, not the way Draco could, but he was good enough at it now to leave Draco more than slightly dazed when he pulled back.

“It won’t end,” Harry said quietly. “But someday, we might be able to have that isolated house, and we’ll even spend a few days there in between saving werewolves and working the downfall of the Malfoys’ political enemies.”

Draco laughed again, and this time the sound was much better, much clearer, than the last one. “Can I ask you one more question, Harry?”

“Of course.” Harry half-draped himself around the back of the chair. “Ask me all the questions you want.”

“Why do you care so much about helping other people?” Draco was staring directly at him, as if he, too, were a Seer and could read the soul with a casual glance. “The Seers can help Doncan. You don’t doubt their ability?” Harry shook his head. “Then why are you volunteering?”

“Because,” said Harry, “if I see a problem, and I can ease it, I should. Or I should tell someone else who can ease it.”

Draco was quiet for another moment. Then he said, “I don’t think I could live that way.”

“I’m not asking you to.” Harry cocked his head. “I’m not asking anyone else to. After all, it would be stupid of me to demand things from others that would require Lord-level magic to accomplish, when they don’t have that magic, wouldn’t it? And this is an extension of the

same thing. If they can't live that way, it would be stupid of me to demand that they do so. But I know I can, so I will."

"Without exhausting yourself? Without making yourself into a repository for every kind of guilt?" Draco spoke that as a challenge, and Harry met it the same way.

"Yes," he said. "Your mother wrote me a letter long ago, Draco, as Starborn, that described a kind of nameless Lord—a vates, I think, though she wasn't thinking about magical creatures, really, and so she didn't use that word. She described someone who would use his magic to serve and heal and protect others, but who could also make judgments. Some people would want him as an ally in unworthy causes, after all. And some people would want their goals met in such a way that it would harm others. And some people would simply ask for silly and stupid things. So he would have to make the decisions as to how he would use his magic, and then live with those decisions, and the consequences if he was wrong. I remembered the serve and heal and protect part, but not the other. I think I didn't feel confident in myself to make those decisions." Harry shrugged. "Now, I feel that way."

Draco, for some reason, broke into a smug smile at that.

"What?" Harry asked.

"They're not going to know what hit them," Draco said softly, "when you go back. And there are going to be so many people who want to be close to you, to have your attention, just because of what you are, Harry, not even because you're powerful or can benefit them. There are going to be people who fall in love with you." His grin grew wider. "And they can't have you, because I'm here."

Harry laughed. "Brat."

"Prat."

"Idiot."

“Git.” Draco leaned forward and kissed him so suddenly that Harry nearly reeled backwards. “Now, go find out when Doncan is arriving, or go talk to Snape, or do something that helps other people,” he said, managing to make the word drip with contempt Harry hadn’t heard from him since their third year at Hogwarts, and then only on his brother’s name. “Hero.”

Harry raised his hand in salute, and departed, deciding to go to the platform where his own carriage had arrived. So far as he knew, it was the only place a Seer would land after bringing someone through the shadows, even by the swiftpath.

“He’s asked for you.”

Harry looked up from the book on place magic he’d been reading—Yelling at the Grass: A Beginner’s Guide—and then laid it down. He’d brought it with him from the Black library, and read through it twice already. Half of that second time had been while he sat outside Doncan’s room, using a small Lumos charm to continue reading when night descended.

He supposed he had missed dinner, but he didn’t feel hungry as he stepped through the unicorn-carved door.

The Seers had given Doncan the most peaceful room Harry had seen yet. There was a contained wind wandering the walls, like the captive current of magic in Woodhouse. Silver tracteries crept down from the ceiling, filled with water, shimmering so gently that Harry suffered an immediate increase in his own weariness. A voice Harry thought was a nightingale’s sang from two corners, and when it paused, then the room filled with a skylark’s music. And, of course, there were no mirrors.

It wouldn’t have mattered, of course; Doncan was blind now. But Harry appreciated the fact that the Seers had chosen this room anyway.

A bed stood in the middle of the room, but it had been shoved aside. Doncan hovered in a mass of air currents instead, charmed to a

temperature he could endure and that would help the burn. Harry doubted there was any true comfort to be found for him.

His skin looked more like volcanic rock than anything human. Black and leathery, it shed a faint smell of cooking meat even now. Harry took a deep breath and stepped closer to him.

Acies's flame had caught him across the chest and the face, before curling around his arms and legs; Harry thought he had survived at all only because of the magical shield he'd raised to defend his sister. His face resembled a mummy's, with hollowed eyesockets, no hair left, all the skin shriveled, and the ears nameless lumps of meat. Harry stared helplessly at the patches of red-white skin where the blackness, and thus the destroyed nerve endings, left off. Nothing was more painful than a burn. He had heard Doncan screaming when the Seers brought him in. They had used potions, but they could only pour them down his throat. His skin was so utterly destroyed that any potion they might have applied directly to the burns would only slide off them.

"Doncan," Harry said at last. He knew Doncan could speak, and hear, though Merlin alone knew how. Perhaps his magical shield had managed to spare his hearing and his throat more than it had his eyes, or it was a result of the magic Calibrid had used on him immediately after the flames struck. It could even have been a combination of his magic and Acies's fire. Almost no one knew anything about the effects of a British Red-Gold's flames.

Doncan twitched against the currents of air, turning his head towards him. Harry pushed aside the wracking pity. He didn't have time for it right now, and neither did Doncan. As Calla—a young, thin, exhausted-looking woman whom Harry had met briefly before she vanished into this room with her charge—had said in her letter, healing him meant little if Doncan would only commit suicide the moment he was strong enough.

"Harry."

Harry winced. Doncan had taken smoke and fire down his throat. His voice scraped and wheezed and expired at odd moments, like puffs

of steam. But he continued on beyond that one word, giving Harry no chance to ask questions.

“It’s gone,” he said. “Everything is. I may not walk again. They can’t tell me how completely I’ll be able to recover, and even if it’s completely, then I won’t have my eyes back.”

“Never?” Harry asked. “No magic—“

“No.” Doncan’s voice was flat and empty. “There are some things magic can’t put right, Harry. The fire burned out my optic nerves, and—there is magic in that flame, too, power meant to destroy. Nothing will ever grow there again.”

Harry thought of ground scarred by fire, and winced at the thought of human flesh with the same thing done to it. “And because of that, you don’t want to live?” he asked.

Doncan snarled and rolled against the air currents, with what effort Harry didn’t like to imagine. Blue and green light shielded his body for modesty’s sake; cloth could have rested on the black, burned skin without paining him, but not on the places where the burns ended, and that was in irregular patches. “Of course not,” he said. “You changed your mind, Harry, about protecting your brother. But I chose to protect my sister, and to do it, I need all my senses. I know blind fighting, but that’s not enough. An enemy who came near enough without my hearing him could finish her.”

Harry nodded. He had expected something like this. He pulled a chair close and sat down in it. “And you think there will be no shortage of enemies after her?”

“Of course there will not,” Doncan whispered. “Did you know that a few people from Dark pureblood families tried to kill her when she was a girl, Harry? They are not Light. They had no reason to care what the Opallines did—except that they didn’t agree with a pureblood family, of whatever allegiance, treating their Squib child like a human being, much less making her their heir the way my father decided to. And since then, people have tried to kill her for the same reason, and people tried to kidnap her when we were traveling.

And when she begins her revolution, bridging the magical and Muggle worlds the way she wants to do, then more people will hate her.”

Harry nodded again, then remembered Doncan could not see him and said, “Has it occurred to you that if you die, you can have no part in her life whatsoever?”

Doncan might have frowned; it was impossible to make out any movement among the leathery folds of his face. “Of course it has. But my part in her life is finished in any case.”

“It is not,” said Harry crisply. “She needs you still. What do you think you have become to her, with the burning?”

“A uselessness,” Doncan whispered. “A liability.”

“Not so.” Harry stood, pacing nearer to him and staring down, forcing away his own horror. That wasn’t important right now. “A symbol, Doncan. A symbol of what power costs. Leaders might not get hurt, but the people around them frequently do. Have you ever been injured in your defense of her before?”

“No,” Doncan said. “Each time, I saw the threats in time, and either got her away or defended her.” The bitterness in his voice was stronger than the scent of cooked meat.

“That’s right,” Harry said. “So she’s never had it slam home to her this way before. She’s going to understand being a leader in a way she never would have if her family remained unharmed. And on top of your burning, she’s got two dozen more of the dead to deal with. Doesn’t she?” Calla had told Harry, briefly, that Paton was not on the Isle of Man, but visiting some of his relatives in Italy. He likely would not hear of the news for some time, or, if he did, would not have been able to travel back to the Isle of Man in time for Calla to consult with him about removing Doncan.

“She does.” Doncan stirred restlessly, and rolled over again, almost hanging upside-down. Harry used his own magic to tug gently at him, righting him. Doncan grunted his thanks.

"She'll be remembering you," said Harry. "Thinking of you. Missing your presence at her side. Wishing she could turn to you for advice, and then remembering that you burned. She might have thought of you as a shield before, or a guardian, her wise older brother. Now she has to think of you as a victim."

"Are you trying to make me feel worse?"

"I am trying to make you see the reality," said Harry. He knew this was the course the Seers would never have taken, or not taken until long months had passed and they realized there really was no other way. Vera's reaction when she heard of Harry helping Snape showed it. They were too focused on the individual. Vera thought Harry should heal for himself, and Calla, from what little Harry had heard from her mouth, thought the same way. They wanted Doncan to make the decision to live solely for himself, and would not think him non-suicidal if he didn't. But that wasn't the way to approach a guardian. "When I broke free of the web that had bound my loyalty to Connor, he couldn't depend on me to coddle him any more. And he actively fought me, because he thought I was trying to kill my godfather, whom he loved. It took him months to realize that I'd been a victim, and that he had to be strong on his own, but once he managed it, there was no turning back."

Harry paused a moment. "If I had committed suicide because my sense of purpose had changed, it would have broken him. I can only imagine what your suicide would do to Calibrid, since she hasn't had months to get used to your gradual disappearance from her life."

Doncan's breathing rushed in and out, fast and labored. Harry wondered for a moment if he should summon Joseph, but it calmed again, and Doncan said, "But I won't change my mind about serving her."

"I don't expect you to," Harry said. "I am counting on you not to, so that you will decide to live. "But she needs you now, and not in the role that you used to play. She needs you so much, Doncan. You can't protect her any more, or so you claim, but you can still advise her. You can still be a symbol, an inspiration, to her, of the people

she needs to be strong for—if you survive. Can you imagine what will happen if you die? She'll plunge down an abyss. Won't she?"

"She can't," Doncan whispered. "She has too many people depending on her."

"Exactly." This was the point Harry had wanted to lead him to, but he had wanted Doncan to be the one to say it. "She's a leader, Doncan, but she's never had to stand entirely on her own. You've always been there, you said it yourself. She can struggle through this loss, I think, because she knows it'll be only temporary—"

"My eyesight is never going to come back."

"And is your eyesight you?" Harry raised his eyebrows. "Is your eyesight the mind that advised her, the will that defended her, the magic that spared her from the dragon's fire? She still has the chance to have all those things. But if you die, she doesn't."

"She'd survive," Doncan said, voice gone fretful now. "She would have to. She would pick herself up and go on."

"And would she do it as well as if her brother lived?" Harry shook his head, then reminded himself, again, that Doncan was blind. "She's lost two dozen of the Old Blood, the people she carries branded on her skin, Doncan. I can't even imagine how much she's reeling right now. And she still has to be strong for everyone, because that's what a pureblood heir does. That's the reason their families grant them power and obedience, because they know that when the crisis comes, they can lean on them. Don't make her lose her brother, too. Committing suicide right now would be the most selfish decision you could make. And I don't think your father trained you to be selfish."

Silence. Doncan breathed. Harry waited. His magic explored, gently, swirling around Doncan's face, and returned to him with an image of the burned eyesockets. Harry winced. He's right. Nothing will grow there again.

“The Seers won’t like it,” Doncan said at last. “They want me to say that I want to live just—because I want to live. The carriage only took an hour on the swiftpath, and it was all Calla chattered at me about.”

“They can like it or lump it,” Harry said. “They’re not the ones making the decision. You are. Did you ever listen whenever someone whined about your not having individuality because you chose to protect Calibrid?”

“Of course not.”

“Then don’t listen now,” Harry said. “I think you should live, Doncan, because it’s the only way left to you to fulfill your vows. You can advise her. You can inspire her. Your role has changed, but you haven’t left her side.”

Silence, again. Then Doncan said, “I made the right decision, by speaking with you. You—have given me back her to fight for, Harry. I cannot change my mind all at once, but I must take this under consideration.”

Harry bowed, his hand over his heart, a fierce gladness filling him. “Good,” he said. “Would you like me to carry any message to her, or send one?”

“Tell her I’ll hear her soon.”

Harry dipped his head one more time, and then turned and left the room. Calla, standing by the door, stared at him as he passed. Harry ignored her. She probably couldn’t imagine what he had to be happy about.

Of course, he didn’t think the expression on his face was precisely a happy one. Fierce, it felt like, and feral. He stopped on the nearest terrace and took a deep breath of the fresh air. Overhead, the moon, just waning from the full, sparkled with a breadth of light that made shadows dart around Harry.

He relaxed the barriers on his magic—an easier task than it had been before he came to the Sanctuary, because the gentle, wearing air

had attacked even the webs inside him—and let it rise around him. A moment later, blue overcame his vision, and he blinked. Phoenix fire was burning through his skin.

He knew arguments lay ahead of him. He would certainly have to argue with Vera and Snape. He would probably have to argue with Draco. Other Seers might add their voices in, if the way Calla talked to Duncan was any indication. He did not care. He had made his decision.

I must go back.

If nothing else, there were the Opallines, reeling in the wake of their loss, suffering. He wanted to go to them, carry Duncan's message, do what he could to soothe the hurts of those left behind, and speak with Calibrid and Paton. He did not feel himself bound to do so. He was not torturing himself with guilt.

He wanted to.

And he did think that Acies's flight was a warning bell. One thing had not remained static and stable in the outer world while he sojourned here. What else had changed? Harry's gaze drifted to the moon again, and he pursed his lips. He doubted the werewolf situation had remained the same.

Why did I think it would?

Because I convinced myself that needing the time to heal was the same as everyone else freezing while I wasn't paying attention. And that wasn't true. I needed the time. The conclusion didn't follow from that.

He could hear Snape and Vera now, telling him that he hadn't taken the full two months yet, that he should remain longer, that the outer world should be able to handle itself better without him. If he encouraged people to rely on him, what would happen if he were killed in battle? The wizarding world needed to stand independent of him.

Exactly. It does. But just removing myself from the equation isn't enough. I have to show people how to follow the principles and not the person—show them that I won't let them become my own personal Order of the Phoenix. That would be true no matter when I went back.

And I want to go back now.

He formed the phoenix fire into wings of shadowy blue light that beat around him, rising up against the stars and sending strange shadows spinning across the Sanctuary. His magic prowled and snarled and longed to do something. And Harry could think of plenty for it to do.

I don't think I could heal fully in two months, now. So what I'll do is go back and keep healing, while working on everything else, too. I'll break the curses on my wrist, and I'll study place magic, and I'll study how to become an Animagus, because that should be useful in war, and I'll work as a vates, and I'll play politics as I have to. I'll live everything all mingled together.

It was different from what he'd had to do other years, he told himself, because then, he hadn't really been in control of anything. He had reacted rather than acted, scrambled after Voldemort or Scrimgeour or the most prominent political player of the moment, and done only as much as necessary to fulfill someone else's demands or stop the situation from moving for a little while. Now, he was going to be the one to make it move.

I trust myself to make at least some of the right decisions. I trust the people around me to tell me when I'm being an idiot and making the wrong ones. I can bow my stubborn neck enough to listen to them. And I have the magic to back up what I'm going to do.

The phoenix fire spiraled up around him, losing the shape of wings as it rose into a blue cone, and Harry couldn't help himself. He opened his mouth, and phoenix song followed the fire—not mourning, as it had been on Midwinter, but joyous and strong, and metallic beneath. A fitting song for a bloodless war, Harry thought, or a war he was going to try and keep as bloodless as possible.

He had the means, if he applied them with wisdom and discretion, to make people glad they had been born.

He startled himself, when the song ended, by feeling an intense moment of pity for both Voldemort and Dumbledore, not to mention all those ancient Lords and Ladies who had started out with good intentions and then fallen into the path of compulsion.

They could do this. They could do such wonderful things. And they didn't.

Well, I will.

He went to retrieve his book on place magic from outside Doncan's room. It wouldn't do to have what he owned lying about everywhere, when he intended to depart from the Sanctuary tomorrow.

Chapter Five: The Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts

“No.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Snape stood with his back to him, brewing the purple potion he seemed to work on exclusively these days. An eyeroll had a fair chance of going unnoticed. He had expected this opposition, and that made it easy to keep his voice calm as he explained again.

“You don’t have a choice in whether or not I leave,” he told Snape’s back. “I’ve already decided that I will—”

“And not spoken with the Seers about this,” Snape cut in smoothly, leaning over the cauldron to scoop up a handful of powdered moonstone, which he feathered out like falling stardust. Harry watched the potion roil for a moment before it swallowed the silver flecks. He wondered what Snape was making. The potions that required moonstone were relatively rare, at least when the stone was that fine. “Do you think Vera will simply let you leave?”

“Come to that, she doesn’t have that much control over me.” Harry stretched his arms over his head and leaned against the doorway again. “But I spoke with you first because I knew this would be the hardest battle.” He paused, but Snape still didn’t look at him. Harry shrugged, and continued. “Not only do I want to leave the Sanctuary, but I think you should stay here.”

Snape spun with a snap of his robes so hard that it almost knocked the cauldron from its base. Harry saw him put out a hand to rescue the tipping potion without taking his eyes from Harry. His face was sallow, his eyes so marked by sleeplessness that it was impossible to miss the gray around them in the ferocity of his expression, and he looked as though someone had been wearing him down, scraping him down, by magical torture for nights. Harry checked his pity. The last time he had asked to know what the dreams were about, Snape’s magic had flared and nearly wounded him before he controlled himself.

“And why is that?” Snape’s voice was low and ugly. “Do you not trust me to control myself around your enemies?”

Harry fought against the urge to lower his gaze. It wasn’t visible on the surface, but he knew there was a spark of betrayal in Snape’s eyes. He could not be as close to his guardian for as long as he had been, and not see it.

And he had to be honest, too. He had to show Snape that he wasn’t playing guardian to an abused child any longer. He had become more of the person Snape had always wanted him to be, but Harry suspected, just as had happened when he’d been forced to go with Evan Rosier and free Durmstrang, that Snape was unlikely to see how much he had grown until he was forced to.

“I don’t trust you to control yourself at all,” he said quietly. “You are having temper tantrums at me. And that’s in the privacy of the Sanctuary, where you know the Headmistress isn’t going to walk around the corner in the next moment and reprimand you for your behavior. What’s going to happen when we go back to Hogwarts? The first time someone makes a mistake in Potions? The first time you have to comfort a first-year Slytherin who misses her mum? The first time you get into a dispute with a colleague, or the first time I’m in danger? Do you think you’ll be able to keep from exploding?”

Snape was breathing fast. Harry struggled not to match him, breath for breath. He had sympathy, yes, but his sympathy had sharpened with an edge of exasperation as the days passed and Snape refused to either modify his behavior or tell him what the dreams were about. Harry no longer had much faith in his ability to heal by himself. He showed no improvement after a month, only a steady decline. And the other day he had raged both when Harry asked about the dreams and when Harry ignored him.

He wants something from me that I can’t give—absolute attention, and permission to just do whatever he wants. And that will be disastrous if he comes back to Hogwarts with me and can’t act like an adult.

“You cannot force me to stay here,” Snape said at last.

Harry kept himself from throwing his hand up, but it was a near thing. "I know that," he said. "I would never force you to stay here. I will tell you that if you come back with me, I won't let your temper tantrums—"

Snape's mouth cracked open in an ugly snarl. "They are not temper tantrums," he said. "They are relics of a suffering that you cannot comprehend—"

"Because you won't tell me!" Harry didn't mean to roar the last words, or to let his magic rattle Snape's ingredient jars on their shelves, but that was what happened. And at least it shut Snape up. He went quiet, staring at Harry as if he were a stranger.

"You won't tell me," Harry went on, when he was sure that he had control of himself. "And what I'm walking back into—I can't tell what the situation might be with the Ministry and the werewolves from this distance, and I know that I'll need to play a role when I visit the Isle of Man that doesn't include hurting them further because my guardian can't control himself. You'll ruin delicate diplomatic missions so easily, sir. You'll put people off before they can ally with me, because they'll wonder why I indulge you to the point of threatening and hurting others. I can resist you, because of the strength of my magic. But others can't."

"I cannot tell you," Snape whispered. "I have been broken in ways that you cannot understand."

"When my mind's collapsed under its own weight." Harry made his voice as skeptical as possible. "When I've mercy-killed people in war and faced the wild Dark."

"Yes."

Harry cocked his head and studied Snape more closely. "That might be true," he said. "But I still can't tell that if you won't tell me."

"I do not wish to."

Harry nodded. "Then the best thing for you is to stay here, and stew in your dreams until you do come to terms with it. When you think you have, you can rejoin me. I'll tell Headmistress McGonagall that she needs to find a new Potions professor and Head of Slytherin House for—"

"I am coming with you," Snape said, his voice like a desert wind.

"To rage and destroy my reputation?"

Snape glared at him, angry, wordless.

"You're uncontrolled," said Harry. "You're not acting like a Slytherin, you're acting like a Gryffindor. And I can't have you close to me if you do that. As I said, I have no intention of restraining your free will if you must come back with me, but I won't allow you close to me in political contexts, and I'll warn the Headmistress about you. She doesn't need to deal with upset parents wanting to know why you've injured their children because you want to indulge your temper."

"You speak as if—" And Snape pulled himself up again.

"Yes?" Harry nodded. "Go on."

"You speak as if you do not care about me." Snape turned and stalked back to his cauldron, in a perfect show of how much it had cost him to say those words. He cannot even look me in the eye in the wake of them.

"Never," Harry said. "You can think of the way I've talked to you for the past month and decide that?" He paused, but Snape did not turn around. Harry shook his head. "The simple fact of the matter is, I can divide sympathy from action now. I can care about you and know that it would be suicide for me to let you curse someone you thought was threatening me. I can understand an enemy's motivation and still oppose him. I can long to help someone, and resist the urge, because she's set herself up as my political enemy." He couldn't help the way his voice rang with wistful frustration. "Isn't that one of the lessons that you wanted me to learn, back when you thought my forgiveness and compassion might kill me?"

Snape said nothing.

"If you come back with me," said Harry quietly, "I'll exile you from my immediate surroundings unless you're thinking. And if you insist on being around me anyway, then I'll have Joseph come with us."

Snape stiffened this time, his hand freezing on the ladle with which he was slowly stirring his potion. His voice hissed like a newborn basilisk. "You would not dare."

"Yes, I would," Harry said. "He hasn't been in the outside world in a long time. He has no other guests who are especially in need of the talking he can provide. He's done all he can for Doncan, and there are others in the Sanctuary who know enough to keep caring for him. He'll come with us and be your personal Seer if I ask him. And I've already asked him," he added.

"You cannot do this to me."

"Yes, I can." Harry restrained the temptation to stalk into the room and shake some sense into Snape. "That's the point. You cannot bear for someone to cross your will, but you are trampling on the free wills of others. I am vates. I will not permit that because you are continuing on with childish grudges you ought to have won free of twenty years ago!"

Snape whispered in the wake of his words. "You think that is the only reason I am suffering? Because of the Marauders?"

"How would I know?" Harry folded his arms and stared at his back. "You haven't told me any differently, remember?"

"You ought to know it is more than that."

Harry felt disgust snap like a broken twig inside himself, and he drew his lips back from his teeth as he hissed. Snape stared at him as he said, "Like it or lump it, Snape. Those are your choices. Come with me with Joseph at your side to act as your Seer, or stay here, or go and keep away from me. That is all."

He turned and left, phoenix fire starting and sparking up his arms. He tried to quell his anger as he walked, and, most importantly, his disappointment.

What in the world does he expect from me? Two months ago he would have been angry that I was putting myself out that much for anyone, let alone for him. A month and a half ago, he scolded me against letting personal emotions take over so that I was useless in politics or battle. Why is this so different?

Snape leaned over the cauldron, his breath coming fast. Then he remembered the dangers of breathing in the fumes from this particular experimental potion, and whirled away from it with a low curse.

His thoughts ran along what Harry had said to him in a passionate tide. It is more than the Marauders, and he ought to have known that. Why can he not leave me alone to heal at my own pace? Why must he push, now of all times? I left him alone to heal at his own pace.

He had, perhaps, overindulged himself, but he had thought he would have another month in the Sanctuary to recover the broken shards and fashion them into a cold, smooth mask. By the time they went back, he had planned to be fully in control of himself again.

And now Harry had said that he was leaving today. And he had offered Snape a choice that was no choice at all.

He leaned against the wall and cursed softly under his breath, the vilest words he knew, Muggle ones from his father mingled among the names of spells that, if he spoke them aloud and if they would work at all in the Sanctuary, would summon crawling nightmares that made Crucio look tame. When that lost its charm, he whirled to face his potion again.

He should have had more time. He needed more time.

But he did not have it.

It seemed that he had done the impossible, or the Seers had done the impossible, or Harry had done the impossible, or they had all done the impossible together. They had made Harry into an imposing young man who no longer looked as if he would crack and break at the first sign of strain. It was such a far cry from the way he had appeared when he first arrived in the Sanctuary that Snape could not imagine what had prompted the change.

Then he looked out the window of his lab at the distant, twining vines and flowers and trees of the Sanctuary, and he knew.

He embraced what happened to him here. He sank his roots deep and grew. He may have thought he had two months and not one, but he seized every chance that he could to break his barriers and his training and heal.

And you have not.

Knowledge burned like ashes in his throat, at least as bitter as the day he had realized Dumbledore was not about to expel Black. He tried to tell himself it was the aftertaste of powdered moonstone.

He knew better.

When Snape faced the choice head-on, he knew there was only one way it could end. He could not stay in the Sanctuary without Harry. Being back at Hogwarts but distant from Harry was only marginally better.

He would have to accept the company of a man he hated, a man he knew was like Black whether Harry would admit it or not.

I cannot fool him, it seems. But I may be able to take him by surprise. I may be able to grow into something that will satisfy him without changing myself completely. The Seers are less pushy than Harry has become, more delicate and careful.

Snape straightened his spine with a snap. It would mean playing a long game, working against the Seer's sight of his soul as well as the dreams that attacked him with long claws nightly now. But he could

do it. He had done harder things, including being a spy among the Death Eaters for a year.

Let me do this, then.

"I fear only this," said Vera. Harry had told her what he intended, and she had taken it more quietly than he had suspected would be the case, only sitting with her hands clasped in her lap and staring out the window at the sunlight that so often sheltered her. She turned back to him now, her face grave. "That you will, once again, begin to neglect your healing, because you would rather countenance the healing of those who need you."

Harry tried to remind himself to be patient. It had been his own idea to come to the Sanctuary and subject himself to the way of the Seers, after all. And he had been patient with Vera before when she said something that he thought ridiculous. I bathed in that pool in the Relaxation Room even when I knew it was doing me more harm than good.

"I will be healing at the same time as I finish other things," he said. "I did invite Joseph to come along, and he is one of the most relentlessly honest people you know; you said so yourself." And she had, when she first explained why the other Seers had chosen Joseph for Snape. "He might come along even if Professor Snape doesn't, because he has an interest in seeing the outside world again, and seeing what becomes of me. He told me that. So the Sanctuary can still keep an eye on me."

"Not as well as it could if you stayed here." Vera cocked her head at him. "You have only Acies as proof of the disasters in the outside world that you fear, so far. And Calibrid has confined Acies in sleep. Why must you hurry away? Aren't you only teaching your enemies that you will come when called, and your friends that they must depend on you to the exclusion of their own powers?"

Harry shook his head. "I think Acies is a sign. And the Opallines would need my help even if nothing else was happening."

"That means you will neglect yourself," Vera said at once.

"You don't know that." Harry frowned at her. "It's what I did in the past, but have I done it for the past month?"

"A month is not long enough to make a permanent change in your life." Vera pushed a hand through her hair, disordering it for the first time Harry could remember seeing.

"A moment was enough to change Doncan's life," Harry said harshly. And he knew he was being harsh, he knew it, and he did not care.

"Physical wounds are different from the mental ones," Vera whispered. "Your Bitter One is an example of how deeply cankered the soul can become when it goes untreated for years."

"Draco and Snape are not going to let me retreat into being the mindless shell that I was," said Harry. "I'm not going to let myself retreat into that." He rose and paced restlessly over to the window. "I appreciate that you don't want me to go, that you fear for me, that you wouldn't want to see me regress just when I've begun toddling forward. But I'm afraid that you have no say in the matter, ultimately. I wanted to explain instead of vanishing." Vanishing would have been easier. "But you cannot make the choice for me."

Vera sighed. "No, I cannot," she said. "And anyone who accepts the vates as vates knows that one cannot compel him. But I will miss you, Harry, and there is one final thing I fear, and have feared since I learned that you were helping the Bitter One and Doncan yesterday."

Harry looked over his shoulder. "What?"

"That you do not know how to lead a normal life." Vera was rising to her feet, her face ancient. "That no matter what happens, you will find yourself relentlessly addicted to the thrill of danger, the rush of pleasure. You might not be needed someday, but you will find yourself unable to retreat from the world."

Harry couldn't help the amused smile that widened his mouth, even though he knew Vera's words were sincerely meant. "I think I was aiming too high," he said lightly. "Normality and I aren't meant to

inhabit the same walks of life. That's all right. I don't need to retreat from the world. I just need to live, no matter what it means."

Vera studied him one moment more. Harry faced her proudly, somewhat startled as he remembered how afraid he'd been of her the first time he'd seen her, almost two years ago now. She could see his soul, that was true, but he had nothing to be ashamed of.

She touched his hair, murmured a blessing, and passed out of the room. Harry gave a satisfied nod. Now to tell Draco.

He made sure to collect Argutus from his favorite sunbathing spot just outside the room. He planned to leave directly after his talk with Draco.

"You're sure this isn't going to be a repeat of the last year and a half, with you ignoring yourself in favor of everyone else?" Draco asked the question looking out the window, so that he stared at the waterfall below his room instead of Harry's face. Harry wondered if that was deliberate, then told himself that of course it was deliberate. What would have been more shocking would be for Draco to stare him in the eye the entire time. Draco had become more studied lately, judging his actions and expressions to a nicety. Harry suspected that his talks with Nina had helped with that, though he hadn't been present for many of them and so couldn't be sure.

"I'm sure," said Harry, and kept his voice strong and certain.

"You're certain that you can keep your goals in balance, instead of sacrificing yourself to save just one person or thing?" Draco shifted his weight from his left foot to his right. Harry couldn't wait until he learned what that meant. One of the things he was most looking forward to was becoming a student of Draco, understanding him in a way that he hadn't learned to do so far.

"I will try," said Harry. "And if I do start making an unnecessary sacrifice, I trust you to pull me up."

Draco turned around to face him then. Harry expected a smile, but there was nothing, only the deep, assessing gray gaze. Harry thought

Draco was looking at him more as a comrade-in-arms at the moment than as a lover, and felt a strange thrill of pride at the thought.

“And you think that you can continue to actually heal, instead of just stay in place?” Draco flung the challenge like a spear.

Harry put his chin up. He was fighting the urge to smile. He would have, except that it seemed right he should match Draco’s solemnity with his own. “I do.”

Draco took a step forward and held out his hand. Harry clasped it with his own. Draco gave a little nod, as if that answered one of his own internal questions. “When do we leave?”

“Thank you for sending us by the swiftpath,” Harry told Vera, as he clambered into the carriage waiting for them. Argutus was looped in shimmering coils around his shoulders and waist, and the Many snake curled tight around his neck. Harry wondered if she would be glad to get out of the peaceful air of the Sanctuary and back into places where she could attack someone else. Of course, Harry was also going back to places where he was more likely to be in danger.

“It is nothing.” Vera looked as if she would like to say something else, but rallied back to the topic at hand. “I know that you wish to reach the Isle of Man quickly, and if not by the swiftpath, it would take you much longer, with the mortal distance as well as the distance through the shadows involved.”

Harry nodded. He was not sure of the Sanctuary’s exact location, but it had not escaped his notice that the carriage had flown east from Hogwarts, the opposite direction from Gollrish Y Thie.

Draco clambered in after him, and sat on the seat next to him, claiming his hand for his own. Harry smiled, and used his Levitation Charm to pull in their neatly packed trunks, shrunken to manageable size.

Snape was next, with Joseph just behind him. Harry studied him from beneath his eyelids as his guardian settled himself. We’ll see how well this works. He caught the look of utter loathing Snape was giving Joseph without seeming to do so, and concealed a sigh. Probably not

very well. But it's the best compromise I could come up with, and Joseph is stubborn.

Joseph looked directly at Harry then, and closed one eye in a slow wink. Snape looked livid, but given that he was pretending to ignore the Seer altogether, he couldn't say anything about it. He tugged a book about Potions into his lap and began reading. Joseph smiled and settled himself, murmuring what sounded like the words of an old ballad under his breath.

"Farewell to you all," said Vera, her face solemn. "Remember us, out in the mirror-world, and do not hesitate to return to the Sanctuary, where things are the opposite of distorted."

"Farewell, sister," said Joseph. Harry nodded, and felt Draco move his head in a bow beside him. Snape said nothing.

"Be prepared," Vera said, a small smile seaming her mouth then. "Our carriages usually take the slower path through the shadows because our guests need time to take in the soothing atmosphere of our home. But the swiftpath is for emergencies, and—very different." She moved backward with a sweep of her hand, and the carriage bobbed into the air. Harry tilted his head back to see the spiraling golden line it ran on, like the one that had borne them here, and was more than a little surprised that he couldn't find it.

A moment later, he figured out the difference. The swiftpath must make the carriages fly differently.

And how.

The carriage shot forward the moment they were sufficiently clear of the ground. Harry caught a blurred, bruise-purple glimpse of the various buildings of the Sanctuary, and then they were below them and the carriage was wheeling high, making tighter and tighter turns. Harry shuddered as the air in front of them turned the color of chalk.

The carriage made a sudden bound forward, and however fast they had been going, they were now going impossibly faster. Harry swore and sat back in the seat, unable to hold on to it, since Draco was

firmly gripping his hand. Draco's grin, Harry noticed when he looked over at him, was more than a bit maniacal.

"Nothing like riding a Firebolt, is it?" Draco said.

Harry shook his head dazedly. On a Firebolt, he was always in control, and he could tell the broom where to go. On the swiftpath, the magic that hurtled the carriage along was in control.

They jolted then, and appeared to rise. Harry looked out their windows, but could see nothing remarkable. They were in the shadows, he supposed, as they had been when they came to the Sanctuary, but this time he could see the edges of the shadows whipping past like gray curtains. Now and then, their path flashed from above them, glowing like diamond dust. Harry felt something strike the carriage's wheels, but it only made them spin; it didn't stop them or slow them down.

"Do things live in the shadows?" he asked Joseph. Snape was apparently absorbed in his book.

"Sometimes," said Joseph. "Some of us think the ghosts of the shadow-weavers are still with us, wandering in the last product of their magic. Did they have souls?" He shrugged. "We don't know, but it makes a nice story to scare someone with the first time they take the swiftpath."

Harry opened his mouth to reply, and then the carriage fell.

Draco let out a loud whoop and grabbed his hand harder than ever. Harry heard Snape snarl out an instinctive Shielding Charm. He held still and tried to tell himself that this was just a Quidditch dive, just like anything he'd made in a game against Gryffindor.

"What was that?" he asked Joseph, when the carriage had righted itself and soared upward again.

"The swiftpath is hung on various hooks," Joseph, who didn't appear at all discomfited, said. "Strung across the sky and among the

shadows, if you will. That was our being tossed to a hook that was lower than the rest.”

Harry turned his head to stare out the windows, but still could see nothing but the shadows and the occasional flash of diamond from above. “It would be something, to know how to do this, myself,” he said softly.

“I don’t think anyone now alive knows how to do this,” said Joseph pleasantly. “There’s certainly no room in the Sanctuary for it. And the shadow-weavers weren’t human. They were the ones who made the swiftpath as well as the rest of the shadows. You’d have to ask them.” His eyes gleamed. “That would be an interesting question for a necromancer, if you wanted to approach one.”

“The only necromancers I know of are with their kin,” said Harry quietly, his mind reciting names. Dragonsbane. Pansy. “Dead,” he added, when Joseph looked at him.

“Oh.” Joseph was still, and Harry wondered again if the Sight didn’t tell him about specific memories, or if he was simply too polite to use it all the time. “Battle?” he asked a moment later.

“Yes,” Harry said. “Both of them.” Then he turned his head and stared out the window at the shadows again, with Draco squeezing his hand reassuringly. Snape read his book, and Joseph softly sang the words to his old ballad.

The carriage came down like a dragon—and the comparison had Harry wincing as soon as he made it—over Gollrish Y Thie. Harry, surveying it anxiously from this high up, couldn’t see any damage.

No, that was reserved for when they approached closely.

The home of the Opalline family straddled Snaefell, the highest mountain on the Isle of Man. Paton had told Harry that there was an illusion of solid stone over the top of it, so great that a Muggle railroad ran across it and never noticed any difference between it and the normal stone of Snaefell. Harry assumed the illusion had been

removed for the benefit of guests, because he could see the skeleton of what had been a British Red-Gold dragon immediately.

The carriage swung around to the west, the direction Harry had approached from with Paton when he came here to celebrate New Year's Eve with the Opallines, and he heard Draco gasp. Harry didn't blame him. He was staring himself.

Fire had blackened the great slab of stone on which Gollrish Y Thie sat; Harry thought he could still see wisps of steam rising from it. Melted snow and equally blackened earth lay beyond that, and small pits that Harry thought might be where magical defenses had burst open, or perhaps where the dragon's claws had gripped. The corpses were gone, but that didn't surprise him. The Opallines would take care of their own first. The house itself seemed to have escaped damage. Perhaps British Red-Gold bones were resistant to its fire. No children played around its gates, though.

Though Harry hadn't thought anyone had announced their coming to the Opallines, someone was waiting for them. Harry knew him by his height and his ragged white-blond hair, not yet grown in completely from where he had cut it in mourning. He had difficulty in waiting until the carriage settled to the stone like a diving bird before he opened the door and advanced to meet him, holding out his hand.

Paton gripped his wrist and nodded to him. "Harry," he murmured.

"You knew I was coming?" Harry asked, studying the Opalline family head's face closely. It showed signs of weariness, but that wouldn't be unusual. Paton would have traveled from Italy to home in the last day, and the travel must have worn him out, to say nothing of what had happened to his blood.

"We felt your magic the moment you left the shades protecting the Sanctuary," said Paton simply. "It has grown very much greater. Did you know that?" He studied Harry with a trace of the gentle curiosity that Harry remembered. "It rings like a song or a chorus of hunting horns."

Harry blinked. "I—didn't know that." It was true that most of the last webs he'd put on his power had been released in the Sanctuary, webs of distrust and insecurity about his own magic and his right to hit other people with the strength of that magic. He hadn't realized it would make that great a difference. Possibly the magic in the Sanctuary had damped his own, or he had become used to it so gradually he didn't notice.

"It's true you positively stink of roses," Draco volunteered.

Paton chuckled, then sobered. That brought home to Harry, more than the mere sight of his face, the gravity of what had happened here.

"Thank you for coming, Harry," he said quietly. "Two dozen dead—we are reeling from the blow." He moved his hand over his face, and the glamour he usually wore faded, revealing the swirls of color that marked his Old Blood tattoos. "Calibrid is working herself into exhaustion to soothe the grief of those around her, and to forget what happened to Doncan while she put the dragon to sleep."

"I can tell her that he's still alive," said Harry. "He did want to die, but we talked, and he changed his mind."

"Did he?"

Harry met Paton's eyes calmly. He wasn't sure that Doncan would want him discussing the details of their conversation with anyone else. "Yes, he did."

Paton seemed to know when not to pry into his son's privacy. He inclined his head. "You are welcome, all of you," he said. "We can offer you food and drink. Many of my relatives who don't know what else to do have been cooking, and the food provides a good distraction for the rest of the family."

"I am a Seer," Joseph said. "If some of those most grief-stricken would consent to see me, I may be able to help."

"I have some healing potions with me, if you have wounded," said Snape.

"And I will lend my magic to do whatever I can," Harry finished.

Draco vibrated at Harry's side, but didn't add anything. Harry squeezed his hand, to let him know that he didn't go unappreciated, and looked up to see Paton nodding at them all.

"We need those and more," he said. "Beyond the dead and the survivors of the dead, we have others wounded by the dragon's fire, though none so severely as Doncan was. Healing potions—we do not have enough, and our few skilled brewers are coming from Siberia and have not yet arrived. Harry, the approach of your magic was soothing some tempers from a distance, but inside, the effect may be greater."

Harry nodded, and followed Paton inside Gollrish Y Thie. "I am sorry this happened, sir," he murmured to Paton's back. "I thought the dragon was asleep, and safe enough for me to leave."

"It was not your fault," Paton said gently, "and ours was not the only loss." He hesitated for a long moment, then continued, "I assume you have had no news since you went to the Sanctuary?"

"None at all," said Harry. "What has happened?" He was already bracing himself for a blow, anything from the Wizengamot passing a resolution to make Dark magic illegal to Philip Willoughby, one of the parents of the children he had killed, successfully bringing him to trial.

Paton sighed through his nose. "Many things, but the most urgent to your particular cause is that the Ministry has managed to form a department for the hunting of werewolves."

Harry jerked to a stop. "What?"

Paton turned and faced him, his eyes grave. "Yes. Apparently, it had been tried before, and rejected. Then Amelia Bones, who is, after all, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, approached the Heads of the other Departments within the Ministry. It seems

there's an old rule that all of them, acting in concert, can overrule the Minister of Magic. Traditionally, of course, there's too much rivalry and professional jealousy among them to permit something like that to happen. But the werewolf panic is higher than we estimated, or Minister Scrimgeour has angered all of them at once."

"Or Bones promised them something," Harry murmured, remembering the panicked woman he had seen after the biting of Elder Gillyflower.

"Perhaps," said Paton. "My relatives who work in the Ministry were not able to learn the whole of it. But the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts has now formed. They sent out hunters a few days ago, with the full moon. Two werewolves were killed, according to the Daily Prophet."

"Did they say where?" Harry's throat felt tight enough to constrict his breathing.

"London," said Paton, as Harry had almost known he would. "A pack in London, one of the fringe ones who live close to the Muggles. The charge was that a rogue werewolf had attacked a Department hunter, and when they killed him, another leaped at them, so they killed her as well."

Harry finally managed to swallow. "And did they happen to give a name of the pack, or a name of the pack leader?"

"Loki," said Paton quietly.

Shock swept through Harry in a windstorm, though in one part of his being, the one that expected bad things to happen, he was not surprised. And then came rage like a firestorm, such that he was hard put to keep his skin from burning.

You've pushed me too far, he thought, aiming the condemnation in the direction of the Ministry. I wanted to remain poised between both of you, taking neither side, but now I have to take the werewolves'. Good luck to you in weathering this war now.

Chapter Six: Downrush

He felt the boy's magic the moment he returned to the world, because, of course, there was no way Harry Potter could ever be quiet.

Falco was meditating in his sea eagle form on top of a church steeple, most of his mind tucked and wandering in contemplation while a small shard floated on the surface to alert him to happenings in the world, including a gun going off anywhere close at hand. One disadvantage of having a large and noticeable Animagus form was that Muggles were likely to choose to shoot at him, for no greater reason than the pleasure of bringing down something unusual.

He felt Harry's magic as light, a fiery star rising in the east. Falco spread his wings and gave a little hiss of displeasure when the sentry shard summoned him. No sense of decorum at all, he thought, as he took off and turned east. No sense of quietude. He is a child.

Lord-level magic ought never to go into the hands of a child. Falco mourned the fate that had made it so.

He had been to Godric's Hollow, to study the twining magical signatures there so that he could better understand his opponent in the fight for the balance of the world. What he had found had puzzled him, but he had understood it after some study.

Most wizards had natural barriers on their magic, walls blocking off the deeper parts of their magical core, beyond which they could not press. Some wizards could not become Animagi after years of study, for example. Others could not cast the Unforgivables, or could not cast Dark Arts pain curses, or could not stay seated on a broom well enough to play a game of Quidditch. Most people accepted their talents and their interests as limitations, but those barriers played their part. And a good thing, too. When a wizard pushed beyond them in a tide of extreme emotion, he might wield Lord-level power, but only for approximately two moments. Then his body, unused to accepting such a flood of magic, would destroy itself. These days, most wizards only breached the barriers when they were trying to both commit suicide and take a hated enemy with them.

Falco would have considered what happened at Godric's Hollow the greatest of coincidences if not for the fact that a prophecy was guiding it. That Voldemort's Killing Curse had been strong enough to smash Harry's barriers but not strong enough to dominate the magic that lay beyond them, as it was in most cases; that the magic had defended its host the only way it knew how, by forming into a mirror and reflecting the Avada Kedavra back at its maker; that the rebounded Killing Curse had struck Voldemort just as he was casting the second one at Harry's brother; and that that second curse had penetrated enough to leave a curse scar but no other mark, sparing Connor Potter's life, had Falco shaking his head.

It was what the prophecy had demanded. It was what fate said should happen. But it still made Falco think that the whole thing was so unlikely that it should not have been allowed to happen in the first place. He would certainly have arranged matters differently if he had been in charge.

He had read the magical signatures, and used a spell that would pull images of the past from the walls and allow him to see what had happened. The magic that saved Harry's and Connor's lives should then have killed them immediately afterwards, as it roared through Harry's body in an unstoppable flood of fire and then consumed Connor. But instead it had swirled into the shadowy image of a serpent and coiled around Harry's cot, guarding him. The child in the memory had smiled and put out a hand to stroke the serpent's head, giggling when it flicked its tongue out to touch his cheek.

Falco could only surmise that Harry's barriers being broken so young had given him a chance at survival. It was not, for obvious reasons, something that happened to children normally. His body wasn't used to containing any usual amount of magic, the way that adult wizards' bodies were. So it had adapted itself to carrying Lord-level magic, and his power, strong enough that it had almost a personality of its own for those first few years, had helped, madly glad to be free from the walls that would otherwise have imprisoned it forever.

Falco had seen, and could feel pity for, the terror that had consumed Albus and Lily Potter when they realized what had happened. There was even the chance that Harry himself could have been the

fulfillment of the prophecy, if they did not chain it so that it would not shift. And, of course, they had hated the Dark edge of Harry's magic, surmising rightly that it came from Voldemort, that the Dark Lord had given some of his abilities, most dangerously the absorbere gift, to the baby.

He did wonder that they had not ever sensed the other Dark edge of magic lingering in the house, but he understood why they might have ignored or denied it. Or simply not felt it; the overwhelming evidence was that Harry's magic had blanketed it from their notice.

But now he understood, and other than wondering if this prophecy might yet end in a tumble of coincidence as unlikely as that which had produced its beginning, Falco had no reason to wonder about Harry Potter's beginning anymore. He did know that the child's birth was natural, but his sudden acquisition of magic was unnatural, and he really should not have been cluttering up the world, still.

And now Harry had come back, blazing and blaring, as though he were the only wizard in the world.

Falco lifted his wings and spiraled higher, turning to the west, towards which the flare had traveled. He supposed he must go along and watch Harry. Soon, the watching would end. It would be time for him to take the field, and to do what he must to keep the balance, a cause greater than his life.

He felt its return as a thick, stinking, choking mist, spreading throughout the clean air and hurting him. He snarled and sank back into himself, curled and coiled, wrapped around the treasure that had sustained him.

One of the treasures.

Then he lifted his head, he, Lord Voldemort, and sought out the direction of the magic, his nose twitching. It came from the east, thick choking magic, horrible dusty magic, the reek of tombs. It was Harry come back, and he might hunt and inflict another punishment on the wounded hunter.

He lowered his head and rested it again in the soft, cool dirt. There was only darkness around him here, no light to mock his blindness. He would rest in this burrow, coiled around the cup, and he would grow strong. He would find a way to heal the wound that kept bleeding his magic away from him.

And he lay in a burrow where no one would think to look for him, save his Thorn Bitch when she woke. This was his property, uniquely his property. He closed his eyes and felt the cup's smooth sides beneath his hands, his fingers spidering over the badgers carved on the handles. He felt an answering echo from deep inside, the whispers of a fragment of immortality.

Harry went into the bedroom of the first burn victim determined not to think of the Ministry for a few moments. Think of the wounded, he instructed himself firmly. Think of how you can help them.

That first victim was a child with bandages wrapped around her burned face, a girl Harry thought he remembered vaguely from the Opallines' New Year's celebration. Sitting by her bed, softly reading to her, was a tall woman he knew he remembered: Angelica Griffinsnest, Paton's first wife, who had separated amicably from him. Harry supposed the little girl was probably her granddaughter. He winced; he could only imagine the pain she must feel right now. She was Doncan's mother.

Angelica looked up when Harry came in, and then nodded and held out her hand to him. Harry clasped her wrist, secretly impressed that she didn't flinch from his supposedly overwhelming aura of magic. Perhaps concern for the little girl kept her from doing so.

"Greetings," she said. "Paton told you what has happened to Oriela?" Her gaze was anxious as she turned back to the bed, and Harry could see why. The girl seemed to have retreated into herself, if the dull glaze of her eyes between the bandages was any indication.

"He did," said Harry softly, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. "That she had given up on living since the burning." He hated talking about Oriela as if she weren't there, but she wasn't reacting to anything. Harry supposed she wasn't there.

Angelica nodded, her curly hair rustling around her. "Some of the others were burned worse than she is, but she's the youngest." Love bled through her voice as she leaned over and picked up the girl's hand. Harry had to look away for a moment; part of him was still wracked with bitter envy whenever he saw parents acting around a child like that. "She knows that she won't ever look the same way again, and—we shouldn't have put it quite that way. The Opallines try to give their children to reality young." Angelica's voice glinted with frustration for a moment. "In this case, it was exactly the wrong thing to do."

Harry nodded. "I think I might be able to help."

Angelica gave him an intense, curious glance. "You're a Legilimens, I know. Paton told me. Will you go into her mind and bring her back?"

Harry shook his head. "I would only want to do that with someone I knew well," he said. "Besides, she's so deep in shock that I might hurt her." He licked his lips, and told himself that just because he hadn't fully explored the limits of this gift didn't mean he could avoid using it to help. "I'm going to sing to her instead."

"What?"

But Harry was already fixing his eyes on Oriela's face, and opening his mouth.

He wasn't sure what would come out. The phoenix song had sounded different each time he sang it. Harry thought it adapted itself to the circumstances, rather than his consciously choosing a sound for it. He barely remembered the music he had made in the hospital wing after Fawkes's fall on Midwinter.

And this time, the phoenix song was gentle.

Harry didn't try to control it; he let the notes swirl out from his lips and go where they would, other than keeping his mind focused on the goal of bringing Oriela back from her catatonia. The song itself warbled and coaxed, dipping almost into inaudibility on a few occasions, then rising into a soaring spire of triumph. Harry found he

could imagine this as a song that the phoenix might sing to coax the sun into rising, or a flower to come through the last of the snow in spring.

It did not force. It did not push. It simply danced, and showed off how beautiful the world was, and asked the listener if she really wanted to give that up. Harry nearly lost himself in a sweet, chortling cascade that soared so high falling out of it was physically painful. He caught himself with his hand on the bed and blinked, but he didn't stop singing.

Flames abruptly sprang up along his arms, blue ones. Angelica hissed at him, something about not bringing fire near a girl who had been so badly burned, but Harry didn't let himself be distracted. The song had called the fire for a reason. He wasn't righteously angry, so it had no reason to emerge otherwise.

He held out his arms, and the blue flames crept down to the end of his fingers in one case and to the end of his wrist in the other. They blazed steadily there, pointing at Oriela, giving her, Harry realized abruptly, an example of a fire that would purify instead of hurt her.

He did not know how long he sat there, flame and song both outstretched, doing nothing to tug her back, but offering her the chance to come out of her coma and see what beauty was all about.

Oriela stirred.

Angelica made a sound that might have been a sob. Harry heard his voice lift exultantly, and for a moment his body seemed to break apart into light as long ago, on a certain Walpurgis Night, it had broken apart into darkness. Golden sunbursts pushed through his skin and struck the walls. He felt a sense of involuntary, instinctive hope, the same kind he felt when he saw the sunrise, regardless of how he might feel about the Light or Light magic. The dawn was coming. He smelled roses, or something like them, and the air was thick and warm and very sweet.

Oriela put out a hand. Harry clasped her fingers with his.

She gave a little shudder when she felt the tickling warmth of the flames, but she didn't try to pull away. She leaned nearer, and then her lips moved under the bandages, whispering a word Harry couldn't make out.

He brought the song to a sliding, swooping end. Oriela stared at him with living eyes for a moment, then looked beyond him at Angelica.

"Mwarree?" she asked, which Harry suspected was Manx for "grandma."

Angelica leaned forward, answering in the same language, her hands fluttering around Oriela's body to avoid touching the burns. Harry sat back, and smiled, and let the flames coil back into his body and his skin snap shut over them.

Perhaps I don't have to learn how to control this magic after all, he thought. It does well enough when it guides itself.

And this had settled him, grounded him, reminded him of what he really was. He was angry about the Ministry, but he would go in angry and determined, rather than simply raging. What he wanted was to bring about circumstances much like these for the werewolves, not to destroy.

Draco had to admit, he appreciated the way that Harry had decided to take this in stride.

When he emerged after coaxing a few badly burned Opallines back from the edge of sinking into themselves, and, apparently, letting the flow of his magic soothe a few more, he nodded to Draco. "Shall we go to the Ministry?" he asked. The words were light, cool. The green eyes were not.

Draco smirked and followed him, walking at his right shoulder. For his birthday, he had given Harry a copy of a book about pureblood rituals and traditions that his own parents had presented him with on his sixteenth birthday, feeling that Harry needed to know about them, too, a year away from his becoming an adult. That book had mentioned in passing that the companions of those Lords and Ladies who actually

treated other people like human beings had often walked at their right shoulders. The book had debated whether it was any companion that did so, on a rotating basis, or only the most favored, the most necessary, the closest to being an equal—in terms of influence if not in terms of power.

Draco thought, although the author of the book didn't, that it was, of course, the most necessary.

They arrived in the courtyard of the Opalline home—which, frankly, made him uneasy with the bony structure of it—and Draco looked around, noting the absence of both Professor Snape and the Seer. “We’re leaving without them?” he asked, trusting Harry to know who he meant.

Harry walked ahead without looking back. “Yes. We are.” He turned to face Draco then, one eyebrow raised. “Unless you really think that I can trust Professor Snape to behave in the Ministry?”

Silently, Draco shook his head. He was surprised and dismayed to note the changes in Snape. Only Lucius had taught him more about self-control. Draco had seen his Head of House walk through many trying circumstances and not lose his temper. He supposed his losing it now had something to do with the Sanctuary, but if he couldn't control himself, he had to expect to be left behind.

Harry nodded. “We’ll go alone. But first, I need you to tell me what my magic feels like. I can’t feel it, myself.”

“I’m not the best person to ask,” Draco mused, his eyes fixed on Harry. “I had time to get used to it, so it isn’t bursting on my senses like Mr. Opalline described. But it does stink of roses, Harry. I meant that.”

“Hm.” Harry gave a long, slow blink. “That could be a problem. I’ll want to surprise my enemies some of the time. What about this?” He did something Draco could barely sense, like flinging a cloth up.

The scent of roses lessened considerably. Draco nodded his approval. Then he asked, because he wanted to see if he was right,

“Harry, are you going to walk into the Ministry and then unleash your magic at everybody?”

“Good guess, Draco,” Harry said. “Are you sure that you still want to come with me?”

“I wouldn’t miss this,” Draco said, and stepped forward firmly to take Harry’s arm. He knew that the distance between the Isle of Man and London was too large to be covered in one Apparition jump, and he still couldn’t Apparate himself. Harry would have to Side-Along Apparate him a few times, a process Draco hated. He comforted himself with the knowledge that there would be flustered Ministry officials at the end of it.

And an angry Harry. Draco did not mind seeing an angry Harry. It confirmed his own beliefs, it comforted him with the knowledge that Harry had learned to be a warrior instead of a peace-maker, and it made Harry look attractive enough that only in the midst of his laughing, exultant joy did Draco want to bed him more.

“Ready, then.” Harry jumped, pulling Draco along for the ride, while Draco thought firmly of the Ministry and not of his nearly lost lunch. They arrived precisely in the middle of the alley with the disused telephone box, which Harry remembered from his first visit to the Ministry with Snape, when he’d been asked to register as a Parselmouth. Harry stepped forward, with a swift glance at Draco to make sure he was well and not trembling too badly after the Apparition, and punched the keys that spelled out the word “magic.”

The welcome witch’s voice spoke, asking them to state their names and business. Harry thought for a moment, wondering how to phrase it, then decided that inconspicuous was best. He had approached the Ministry with his magic tightly under wraps, after all.

“Harry and Draco Malfoy,” he said. “Here to see Amelia Bones.”

The telephone box whirled, and two silver badges dropped into Harry’s waiting hand. He tossed Draco’s to him, then paused in the

middle of fastening his own to his robes. The magic on the telephone box had obviously misinterpreted his words. The badge said HARRY MALFOY.

Draco snickered.

“Oh, shut it,” Harry muttered, and used his magic to blur the last name into unrecognizability. They stepped into the box, which shut behind them and, after a moment, lowered them into the ground.

Harry kept his eyes half-closed on the way down, pondering what he would say. He knew how he wanted the conversation to go—his demanding an apology, Bones offering the apology and the immediate rescinding of all werewolf hunting—but he knew it wouldn't actually happen that way. She had pushed through a Department to hunt werewolves. She was desperate. He wondered if it was only fear, or if someone had pressured her, or if she stood to gain political power out of this, or if it were a combination of all three.

Well, I'll start by letting my magic flare, and see what she might betray. After that, I'll speak as openly as I can, to let her know that this does not please me. And then I'll go to Scrimgeour. I still don't know what he'll do in this.

That Scrimgeour hadn't interfered so far, however, suggested that his hands were tied. And Harry knew that he might be angry at him for using magic inside the Ministry. They had had an agreement. Harry could use the means that other wizards did to influence action in the Ministry—political power, money, persuasion—but he wouldn't use magic. It was Scrimgeour's position that Lord-level magic, because it wasn't available to ordinary wizards and witches, was unfair to use in a place largely devoted to ordinary wizards and witches.

But I don't think the Ministry is what he wants it to be, and it never will be if some of its excesses aren't curbed. Right now, they're helping ordinary witches and wizards at the expense of some who happen to be lycanthropes. If Scrimgeour denies that, then I'll refrain from using magic in the Ministry as long as I can, but I'll be on the opposite side from him.

The lift clicked to a stop, and they stepped out into the Atrium. Draco blinked at the fountain of a wizard, surrounded by a witch and magical creatures all gazing adoringly at him. Harry ignored it. It stung his temper, and offended him on several different levels.

The guard waiting by the gates into the rest of the Ministry was a woman with gray hair and an incurious face. She just watched them as they approached, and Harry congratulated himself. He must have done a good job of wrapping up his magic if she sensed nothing out of the ordinary.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic,” she recited, in a fast, dull drone. “My name is Erica. Let me register your wands for you.” She reached out an expectant hand, and Draco gave her his.

Harry waited until it was handed back, then shook his head with a woebegone expression when she looked at him. “I can’t,” he said. “Sorry. I just came back from a long journey, and I left it with my trunks.”

Erica frowned and started to say something, but then caught her breath. Harry realized that she’d noticed the lightning bolt scar on his forehead. In a moment, life and animation returned to her face.

“You’re him,” she whispered. “Harry Pott—the one who used to be Harry Potter?”

Harry nodded, wary. She could do anything from demand an autograph to let them sneak in to summon other people to see the Boy-Who-Lived. With Harry’s luck, she would turn out to be related to one of the children he’d killed, and would delay them.

“It’s such an honor to meet you,” said Erica. “Imagine, you coming into the Ministry this way, like any normal person!” She clasped her hands and beamed at him.

Harry saw a way to take advantage of the hero-worship in her eyes. “Yes,” he said, lowering his voice and leaning forward. “About that. I’m not here with magic blaring because this is a secret mission, Erica.”

“Really?” Erica’s eyes shone. “It is?” She looked like a young girl, and Harry wondered if he had misjudged her age. On the other hand, being on the gates into the Ministry and having nothing to do but register wands all day might make any excitement enough to reduce her to babbling.

Harry nodded seriously. “No one can know that we’re going into the Ministry right now. We have enemies.” He stressed the word, and saw Erica’s eyes widen in delighted comprehension. “So can you let us through, and not tell anyone that I don’t have my wand?” He stared up at her from beneath his fringe, and waited.

“Of course!” Erica opened the gates for them with shaking hands. “This is wonderful. You’re wonderful. This is so wonderful. I promise I won’t tell anyone, I promise, I promise—“

Harry managed to incline his head and look grateful, or, at least, grateful enough to satisfy her. They were through the gates in a few moments, and making for the lifts. Draco was chuckling at his back.

“Someone has a worshipper,” he said.

“I could have a lot more, if I wanted to try,” said Harry, and shook his head to get rid of the uncomfortable prickling sensation that Erica’s fervent gaze had given him. “Now, let’s get to the second floor.”

Harry let Draco go in front of him when he got to Amelia Bones’s door, and chat and flirt and laugh with the Auror standing guard there, enough to get him to lower his guard and at least ask Bones if she’d see them. Harry himself remained behind Draco, head bowed as if shy, his trainer scuffing the floor to add to the image.

“Tell her that it’s very important,” Draco said, near the end of the conversation. “I’m acting as my father’s messenger in this.”

“I’ll tell her,” the young Auror promised, and then opened the door to speak to Bones.

Draco wandered back to Harry. It was no surprise to Harry to glance up and see him looking pleased with himself, though his smile

lessened a bit when he looked at Harry. "You could at least look as if you were jealous of me for flirting with someone else," he muttered.

"But you don't mean anything by it," said Harry, wondering why Draco wanted him to be jealous.

"Neither did Nina, and you got jealous of that," Draco pointed out.

Harry flushed. He hadn't liked feeling that way. "She could See your soul," he said, "and help you in ways I can't. That isn't true this time."

Draco, who now appeared extremely smug, had just opened his mouth to reply when the Auror leaned back around the door again and said, "Mr. Malfoy? She'll see you now."

"Excellent," said Draco, fitting the haughty pureblood mask to his face so fast that Harry blinked in surprise, and he led Harry through the door and into an office that seemed, to Harry, to be even more crowded with wizarding photographs than Scrimgeour's old office had been. In this case, though, they were mostly Aurors posing with captured criminals, who seemed to be fighting like mad to get away.

Amelia Bones herself sat behind her desk, a formidable, gray-haired woman Harry had only seen in the Wizengamot before. She had a straight back and direct eyes that fixed on Draco the moment he entered.

"What do you want?" She sounded wary but interested. "Has Lucius Malfoy actually sent his son to make peace with the Light elements in the Ministry? That would be a first, for him to work with us instead of trying to corrupt us."

Draco shook his head. "I think you misunderstand me, Madam. I do have a message, but it's much simpler than that. Look behind me." He bowed and stepped away.

Harry looked up at Madam Bones and released the muffling cloth on his magic.

Bones gasped and sagged back in her seat. Harry himself didn't feel much difference, other than the removal of the barrier, but Draco put out a shaky hand. Harry turned to look at him. His face was pale, awed, his eyes wide with something that might have been desire. Harry told himself that was natural, the reaction of many wizards and witches to Lord-level magic, and turned back to Bones.

She obviously didn't feel his magic as a pleasant sensation, like the scent of roses. She had her hands clenched so she wouldn't cower, Harry thought, and she was striving to keep her chin up while she shook.

"What do you want?" she whispered.

"I came to tell you that I'm angry about this Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts," said Harry, his voice so steady it surprised even him. It was stone on the surface, but the cold anger beneath that stone was obvious to anyone who listened. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of Bones's office walls slowly icing. "I have not taken a single side so far because I think that both the Ministry and the werewolves are wrong in how they go about waging this conflict—and while I am bound to help the werewolves, I am not bound to violent revolution. But now, you have done this. What am I to think? It seems as if you are playing right into the hands of the werewolf packs. You're hunting them, making the dead into martyrs and giving the live ones the idea that they must strike back, because you will give them no mercy, and they should at least die fighting. There will be people who might have used political means against you but will grow angry now. Laura Gloryflower, for instance. Her niece is a werewolf, and she is puellaris, sworn to defend her children whatever comes. Do you really want a lioness breaking your neck for what you have done?"

How could you be so stupid? he asked in his head, but he was being diplomatic. Do you want to tug the wizarding world into another maelstrom, divide us with Voldemort still out there? Fenrir Greyback is dead, but Loki might join the Dark Lord if he thought that was the only way to gain protection.

“We had no choice!” Bones snapped, her hands clenching harder than ever. “I had received threatening letters. We all have. It’s true that no Elder of the Wizengamot has been bitten in the last two full moons, but those letters—they promised a revolution. They promised blood.”

“Can I see one?” Harry asked. His voice was still smooth and steady and cold, but he was thinking over the terms of his promise to Loki. I bound him and his pack not to bite anyone for the full moons of July and August. I didn’t make them promise not to write threatening letters. Damn it!

Bones, never taking her eyes off him, fumbled in her desk, opened a drawer, and tossed a folded letter to him. Harry opened it. The handwriting was unfamiliar, but the pawprint at the bottom, the only signature, did rather announce that it came from a werewolf pack, and the phrasing was similar to the phrases that Loki had used in the letter he sent Harry.

He skimmed the letter. Rivers of blood will flow...no wizard allowed to hide...wizarding world made to pay for its crimes against werewolves...call us crossbreeds...engage in a contest where strength and speed alone matter, and the strength and speed are all on our side...

Harry looked up. “I fail to see how threatening letters made you feel you had no choice but to hunt wizards like beasts.”

“They are not wizards,” said Bones, her eyes and face full of passion. “They are animals. They become so from the first moment they take the bite. It alters them. I mourn a friend lost to them, because she is dead, the Emily Gillyflower I knew. They will run wild and bite others even under the influence of Wolfsbane. I know that. The Evergreen who bit Emily was under the influence of Wolfsbane. He chose her as a target. Saying that werewolves will become docile because they register and take the potion is wrong.”

“You seem to forget they can pass that curse on even as you hunt them for doing so,” Harry remarked, tossing the letter back to her. “Werewolves can make more of themselves. And they’ll have the

motive to do so if you keep pushing this hunting, and the new werewolves will have to join the other side, or go completely rogue from either, because you offer no compromise. Didn't you think of that at all?"

Looking into her eyes, Harry saw that she hadn't. She was terrified. Fear ruled her.

He couldn't control her through fear, either. She might do what he wanted for a little while, but then something or someone else would scare her more, and she would go back to her old ways.

"They'll die eventually," Bones said fiercely. "There's been no evidence that the curse can exist apart from a werewolf, if it ever could. We kill them all, and there's no one to pass the curse on. If you had remained away like you were supposed to—"

She cut herself off, but Harry had heard it. He leaned forward. "If I had remained away like I was supposed to?" he asked mildly. "What?"

Bones wavered for a moment, but her anger, or maybe her self-righteousness, seemed to overcome even her terror of him, and she rallied. "We would have hunted most of them to death," she said defiantly. "There's a spell that can let us find them in human form, now, that tracks the beast within them. We don't have to confine the hunting to the full moon anymore."

Harry's heart gave a single, hard beat. They could find Hawthorn. And Wilmot.

"I do wonder," Bones went on in a musing tone, "what that spell would say when applied to you. *Comperio lupum!*" She flicked her wand, which she must have pulled out of the drawer at the same time as the letter, at him.

Harry, caught in a calm rage, let the spell take effect. A blue glow formed around him, and then faded into his skin. Bones looked incredibly disappointed.

“That surprises you, doesn’t it?” Harry asked her, in a voice gone so flat that he saw Draco edging away from him out of the corner of his eye. “It shocks you that I could fight for the rights of werewolves without being one myself.”

Bones had her hands clenched again. Harry hoped vaguely that she might snap her wand. “It does not matter,” she said. “You will be defeated in the end. Hunted down like the rest of them. Laws can change. Departments can get created. Restrictions on the use of magic can pass. A restriction on the use of dangerous and destructive gifts, for example. Absorbere abilities, perhaps?”

Harry stared at her in silence for a long moment. Does she know what’s she dealing with? No, it seems she doesn’t.

Time to tell her.

He let his magic rise around him, the phoenix flame burst through his skin, his confidence shine in his eyes. Bones cowered again, but Harry suspected she would tremble before any strong opponent at the moment. What was important was to give her words to remember, so that she would know he wasn’t just any strong opponent.

“I’m not who you used to oppose,” he told her, quietly. “I’m something much worse than that. I’m someone who is going to win this struggle, because I will never give up. I’ve tried to refrain from stepping on the Ministry’s free will. Now, I don’t care, because the Ministry has both broken the wills of others, and encouraged those others to enter a situation of war in which more people will suffer confinement and torture and oppression. No. No more. I will try to keep this a bloodless revolution, but I promise you a violent one. In the end, I aim for all the old preconceptions to be snapped, for people to think instead of reacting in fear, for werewolves to have as much right to justice, including being tried for their crimes, as everyone else. We’ve always tried to force any dangerous situation to go back to normal, to stay safe and the same. I want nothing to be the same when I’m done.”

Bones shook, lowering her head to bury it in her arms. Harry turned on his heel and made his way past Draco, who scrambled to follow him.

"We'll visit Scrimgeour next," Harry said, in a voice he hardly recognized as his own. "I want to know how much of this he knew about, and why he hasn't done anything to stop the hunting so far."

"A moment," said Draco.

Harry turned around, wondering if the young Auror who guarded Bones's office was aiming his wand at them. Draco, though, caught his chin in one hand and leaned forward to kiss him. Harry welcomed the kiss eagerly, and Draco stepped away from him too soon, looking less smug than proud.

"That was wonderful," he said.

"Glad you think so." Harry smiled grimly as he headed for the lifts again. "I suspect Scrimgeour won't."

Rufus felt Harry coming, of course. Who wouldn't?

The wave of magic traveling through the halls of the Ministry felt to him like a pounding pulse, the steady push of sap up through the trees in spring. Rufus had learned from his Muggleborn grandmother, whose father had been a forester, that such a force was enormously powerful. It brought life back to the world. But it was also relentless. Once the sap started moving, nothing could stop it.

And that was Harry, now, apparently.

Rufus was waiting, with his hands folded and Percy Weasley behind him, when Wilmot opened the door for Harry. Behind him came only young Malfoy—and no one else. Rufus raised his eyebrows, and almost asked where Snape was. That Harry was here without him would have made a story, he was sure.

But it would also have put off the main point of why Harry had come to see him, and that was something Rufus would not do. He kept his eyes fastened on Harry's and waited.

Harry's face shone. His eyes shone. The air around him rippled now and then, seeming to reflect light, as if it were a sheet of tin only sometimes turned so that it caught the sun. Rufus wondered if he was looking on the young vates or a young Lord. He was sure that Harry, when playing a vates role, had had a more thoughtful look on his face in the past.

So he has been pushed too far. He has crossed a line he would not otherwise have crossed. I have heard that a vates is not compelled to care about the wills of those who actively trample freedom. He may be required to defend, rather than attack anyone, and oppose only those actions that hurt others, but he need not hold himself back as far as Harry does. Or did.

They had an active vates on their hands now, Rufus supposed, rather than a reactive one.

He had known this day would come. It was the reason he had begun doing the research on vates and the wizards who had tried to achieve the title. What he had learned had told him that Harry could be more formidable, and thus more of a threat to the Ministry, than he had been so far.

That day has come.

"I need to know what you know about this," Harry said. "And why you didn't try to stop them."

Rufus gave him the truth. "I knew nothing about the Department until it was created, a day before the full moon. And I've talked with the Department Heads. All of them are united against me, in agreement with Amelia. I had thought I managed to recover enough balance after my misstep in opposing their decrees too openly, but I haven't. They distrust me, and they have my every move under scrutiny. The only actions I could take against them would be illegal, and they would have a reason to call for a vote of no confidence."

"So you won't act," Harry said.

Rufus shook his head. "No. Not when I know Amelia would become Minister the moment I was voted down."

Harry's eyes narrowed. Then he snorted. "I was going to ask where your principles are in the face of your citizens being murdered, but that's unfair. I know exactly where they are."

Rufus gave a slow nod. So he is not totally given to irrationality, then, even if he no longer sees a reason to respect our wills. Interesting. And that will only make him the more dangerous, of course. Revolutionaries who fall into the depths of their passion are easier enemies to handle. "Yes. I favor reform. Amelia would do more and more damage if she became Minister, and though I suspect a few of the Department Heads would abandon her inside of a month, what would that month bring? I can do nothing right now but move slowly. Slowly work myself back into their good graces, slowly rebuild my support network, slowly convince most of the Aurors to ally with me instead of with Amelia." And the Unspeakables, he thought, but he could not say that aloud. The Unspeakable contacts he had were the most delicate part of this whole affair. They had approached him, quite unexpectedly. But they had warned him they would abandon him again if he spoke of them to anybody. Rufus had never understood the internal politics of the Department of Mysteries, but he didn't need to understand to do what they told him.

"I favor revolution," Harry said quietly.

Rufus asked, because he had to ask. He knew Percy, at least, would ask why he hadn't asked when this was done. "With yourself as Minister?"

Harry's eyes flashed in disgust. "No!" The denial was so vehement that Rufus sat back in his seat, relaxing for the first time since Harry's entrance. Harry went on, his voice rushing headlong. "I favor mental revolution. I favor people having to think about what they're doing, instead of just jumping to conclusions. I favor people knowing when something's just a lie, the way the idea of Wolfsbane doing nothing for werewolves is. I favor getting people to follow my principles, not me."

Rufus sighed. "That cannot come about suddenly."

"Probably not," said Harry. "But it can come about faster than it has been doing. And in the meantime, I can protect and defend those who are being hurt, and work to change minds without compulsion."

"What weapons will you use?" Rufus asked.

Harry looked at him, let his magic flare around his body, and swept his fringe back from his face to reveal the lightning bolt scar. It was answer enough.

"I cannot let you interfere in the Ministry with magic," Rufus told him.

"I shall hope that I don't have to." Harry's voice was polite, but implacable.

Rufus wished, in deep frustration, that he had not taken the Minister's office. If he were still Head of the Aurors, he would enjoy being on Harry's side, doing everything he could to foil Amelia without letting her find out it was him, letting his Slytherin cunning and love of risks that might pay off hugely overtake his Slytherin caution. But he was Minister, and bound.

"Then good luck in those parts of it I can wish you good luck in," said Rufus. The Boy-Who-Lived and a Lord-level wizard, using his fame and his magic against us. Merlin, let it not come to war.

"Thank you, Minister," said Harry. "The same to you." He turned and left the office, with Malfoy close behind him. Rufus wondered if he had seen how adoringly young Draco looked at him. Well, he probably knew the general outline of that adoration, but not the specifics of it.

Bloody hell, Rufus could feel something like that stirring in his own belly. The natural desire to be close to such a source of magic was mingling with the knowledge that Harry had weapons no one else had ever had, and might actually be the one moral Lord in several hundred years. Rufus could imagine a future in which he did follow Harry, and was the happier for it.

But this was about responsibility, not simply personal happiness. And thus he and Harry had come to a parting of the ways.

“You did the honorable thing, sir,” Percy said, as if to comfort him.

Rufus nodded, then frowned. “Not as honorable as I could have,” he muttered. “I forgot to tell him about the Liberator’s letters.” He turned to Percy, but he was already scrabbling for quill and parchment. Rufus smiled grimly. His enemies couldn’t watch Percy’s correspondence as closely as his, since Percy handled so much paperwork.

Let it begin, then. He lifted his head and met the eyes of his grandmother in the portrait of her that hung across the room. It seemed that she winked at him. I’m doing what I know I have to do. There’s that comfort.

Wilmot met them outside the door, and from his glance, Harry knew he wanted to talk. He nodded and used his magic to wrap them in a privacy ward. Wilmot at once leaned closer, and whispered.

“Did you know that the hunters are stalking Loki’s pack?”

“Yes, and that they’ve developed a spell that tracks werewolves.” Harry stared at him. “Are you all right?”

The Auror gave him a strained smile. His blue eyes, Harry knew, were really amber behind his lenses, and he would have slightly longer teeth than normal from the full moon nights just past. Merlin knew how Edmund Wilmot had managed to maintain his job in such a werewolf-paranoid Ministry, but Harry wanted to see him keep it. “They don’t use it in the Ministry,” said Wilmot. “For the most part. People consider it an insult to be suspected of lycanthropy these days, and would object. Besides, they have no reason to suspect me. So far.”

Harry nodded, a bit reassured.

“Do you know who died?” Wilmot asked then.

Harry shook his head. "Only that two werewolves did. I didn't see the Daily Prophet article, though someone informed me of it."

"Well, the names wouldn't have meant anything to you, anyway," said Wilmot. "They called them by their legal names, not the ones they chose." He hesitated and swallowed, then said, "It was Loki who told me, because what happened changes everything."

Harry felt a rush and roll and swoop in his stomach, and told himself to stand steady. "Does it?" he asked.

Wilmot nodded, his face shadowed. "Yes. The male werewolf who died was a youngster named Briar. The female—" He shuddered a bit. "The female was Gudrun. Loki's mate. An alpha pair of a pack is one heart, one blood, one breath. Loki's declared vengeance on her murderers, Harry, in accordance with pack law, and there isn't anything that will stop him."

Chapter Seven: The Alliance of Sun and Shadow

Harry spoke with McGonagall via the communication spell Charles had taught all of them the moment he was out of the Ministry. The news of Loki's mate had prompted him to put his plans in motion sooner than he would have liked. When he had left Bones, and then Scrimgeour, he had envisioned having at least a month, until school began, to pull everyone together. Now, he knew that would be impossible, and it was especially important that he meet with the werewolves before the next full moon.

Hogwarts was the best place to do so, if the Headmistress would permit the wards to be lowered in the Forbidden Forest.

"Madam?" he asked, the moment the soft chorus of phoenix song above his wrist was answered with the Headmistress's voice.

"Harry!" He could hear more dismay than anything else in that voice. Harry smiled grimly, wondering if she were worried that he was back from the Sanctuary early or that he had walked straight into the center of a maelstrom.

"Madam," he repeated, and then went ahead with his request. "I am trying to create a formal alliance between wizards and magical creatures. I think it's needed, with what happened to the werewolves and to the Opallines—"

"The Opallines?"

"Acies came with fire," said Harry, narrowing his eyes to try to get certain images out of his head. "I would not be surprised if the Department started hunting her, too, or at least demanded that she be given over to them when she wakes. And of course the other magical creatures are always vulnerable. Umbridge was able to get laws passed against them very easily when she was head of the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures. I think this department is less sane than she was." He turned into the main point of the conversation then, afraid that McGonagall's questions would distract him again. "I need your permission to meet with as many magical creatures as possible, and as many of my allies

as will come, in the Forbidden Forest. I'm issuing an invitation to the werewolves."

McGonagall's tense silence was answer enough.

"I know that you don't like them on school grounds," said Harry quietly. "But I give you my word that they will be safe for the duration of the meeting. If they try to attack Hogwarts, or anyone there, I will use my magic against them."

McGonagall's voice crept back like a kicked dog. "I am reluctant to grant permission even so, Mr.—Harry. You know that you cannot predict their actions, and after these killings, they will only be wilder and more irrational."

"Some of them will be," Harry said, thinking of Loki. Wilmot had emphasized twice more how nothing, not the threat of magical punishment to his pack nor offers of assistance, would keep Loki from taking vengeance. "But others have seen the danger now, I think. And it is not the day of the full moon. Their magic resistance and their strength will lessen each day until the dark of the moon. I would choose to set the meeting at the actual dark if I could, but that is too far away, and I must move now. Will you let me use the Forest?"

"If you must."

"Thank you, Madam," Harry said. "I intend to have the alliance meeting there on the fourth of August, two days from now." He started to cut the communication spell, but McGonagall spoke before he could.

"Why did you return early, Harry?"

"Acies came and burned the Opallines," Harry said simply. "I knew that if one thing had gone wrong in the outer world, then something else might have. I decided to return."

"Are you done healing?"

“As near as I could come in a month,” said Harry, certain Draco was snickering, though he couldn’t look over his shoulder to check. It was humiliating, to be standing in the middle of an alley covered with graffiti and talking to his Headmistress about his mental health. “I’m going to continue the process now that I’m back. I brought a Seer with me, though he’s mostly for Snape.” He supposed he could talk to her about that, too, though he didn’t have time to answer every question. “I should warn you that Professor Snape is on the verge of snapping altogether, Madam. He often loses his temper with me and goes into magical rages. The Sanctuary began the work of destroying his mental walls, but he won’t tell me what his dreams are about, and he won’t tell me what made him so upset.”

McGonagall sighed. “If he can gain control of himself, of course, he’s welcome to come back and teach in the autumn. If not, then I will ask someone else. I do have another candidate who could teach Potions for at least a term, if I offered him enough.”

“Thank you, Madam,” said Harry, and this time he did let the spell fade. He reached out and took Draco’s arm, drawing him nearer to prepare for a Side-Along Apparition. His mind worked busily. Wilmot had promised that he would send the invitation to Loki’s pack, though he was doubtful about how many of them would come. Harry himself could visit the Forbidden Forest and inform the Many and the centaurs of the alliance meeting, assuming they wished to attend. He would send owls to his human allies whom he hadn’t taught the communication spell to. He had no idea how to get in touch with Dobby, the only house elf who might have an interest. Harry supposed he was perfectly capable of finding out about the meeting on his own and attending.

“Harry!”

He jumped and looked at Draco. “What?” he asked.

“I’ve been trying to get your attention for two minutes.” Draco shook his head, then leaned forward and stared into his face. “You realize Snape will go mad when he realizes that you’re attending a meeting with werewolves at it? Specifically, the werewolves who coerced and threatened and tried to bite you?”

"That's why he's not going," Harry said.

He thought he heard Draco mutter something just before they vanished, something along the lines of, "This, I have to see."

Snape knew that Harry had disappeared while he was brewing healing potions for the Opallines. That was the only thing that kept him from running out of his lab and demanding explanations immediately. If it had been during the carriage ride, then he would have cursed Joseph by now.

As it was, the Seer was on the other side of the lab helping prepare and chop and sift the ingredients he needed.

Snape gave him yet another over-shoulder glance of wary disbelief. When Joseph had first slid into the room between the dead dragon's ribs which Paton Opalline had given Snape for a lab, Snape had whirled around, his wand up and an Unforgivable hovering behind his tongue.

Joseph had held out his hands and said, speaking slowly and clearly, "I don't know that much about potions, but I'm an expert at following directions. Let me. You need an extra pair of hands."

And, well, he was right. Snape did. It seemed that he was still capable of being rational on the subject of Potions, if nothing else. He moved his head sharply at another table, already set up with mortar, pestle, several knives, and beetle shells, flower petals, and other ingredients that needed to be of a certain consistency in order to work. "The flower petals into a dust," he directed. "The beetle shells to be pounded like sand."

And Joseph had nodded and set to work.

Nor had he once tried to speak while they were working. Snape had waited for it, certain it was coming, some gentle inquiry after his health or teasing comment about how similar their shared pasts must have been. Some of the best retorts he'd ever thought up waited impatiently for use.

Joseph said nothing. He passed Snape each ingredient as he finished with it; he knew a useful spell that curled around the fine dust like an invisible jar and wafted it across the distance between them. He never looked over except to be sure that the ingredient arrived at its destination. Then he went back to pounding, slicing, sifting, sanding, with a dedication that said he had won his patience and skill at the task with hard labor.

Snape grew more and more distracted himself, to the point where he almost substituted dragon scales for beetle shells, which would have ruined the potion entirely. He waited. Joseph said nothing.

Another packet of purple, lavender petals turned almost into a fog, floated over to him. Snape counted to three, then whipped around, ready to surprise an expression of pity on the Seer's face. Joseph was bent over his mortar and pestle, counting each beat with a soft voice.

Snape could not take it any more.

"Say what you came to say and be done with it!" he snarled.

Joseph finished the count before he responded—so much like something he would have done himself, in an ordinary mood and confronted with someone upset, that Snape's resentment soared to new heights. Then he looked calmly back at Snape. "Why do you assume that I came to say something and not help you prepare potions?" he asked.

"Because otherwise you would be talking to grief-stricken Opallines and easing their petty fears."

Joseph adopted a wistful smile. "No. The worst cases were all sung out of their dreams by the time I reached them. I spoke to a few grieving relatives who just needed to see that this wasn't the end of the world." He shrugged and turned back to the mortar and pestle. "That son of yours is remarkable."

“He is not my son.” Snape made an ugly sound that he’d meant to be a laugh when he started it, and which now had no name. “Or had you missed my distinct lack of any kind of charm, either to attract a mate or pass on to a child?”

“Whatever you say.”

Snape just barely kept himself from snapping, eyeing Joseph’s back. Joseph was sweeping some beetle shells that weren’t fine enough for him back to the knife now.

He had met someone like this once before, Snape finally realized, and it was not Sirius Black. It was Gray Grim, whose real name he had never known, a Death Eater and recruiter for the Dark Lord. He was like water; whatever someone else said, he knew the counter to it, and he would wear down logical arguments against joining the Dark Lord like water wearing down stone.

Snape himself had never argued against him, because he had had Lucius to convince him to join the Death Eaters, but he had seen him demolish opponent after opponent, without ever appearing to do so. And now it seemed that he had a Seer doing the same thing.

He turned, stiff-shouldered, back to his cauldron, and wondered whether this new discovery would make his life easier or harder. Draco made sure to step out of the way when Harry landed with a sharp thump on the flagstones outside the Opalline home. He suspected that Harry would either go after Snape or to Paton Opalline immediately to demand ink and parchment and a quill. Draco would rather go along and watch than get in the middle of any conflicts that might result from those things.

As if watching is a problem, he thought, as his eyes traced the slight shimmering in the air around Harry. He’s beautiful when he’s angry. Well, and plenty of other times, too, but especially then.

Harry found Paton Opalline in a few moments; Draco was unsure if Harry had tracked him down or if the Opalline leader had felt Harry’s magic approach and made himself easy to find. Harry’s words were

clipped as he explained softly about the meeting he wanted to hold. Paton nodded and made a few apparently sensible suggestions, which Harry accepted with short nods of his own. Draco strained to listen in, but heard little more than the names of some of Harry's allies and "werewolves."

His attention wandered, so he was the first one to see Snape enter the small antechamber where Harry and Paton were holding their discussion.

Just as he did, Harry shook his head and said, "No, I'm not sure the werewolves are safe, but I have to invite them anyway."

Loud enough to be heard.

Loud enough to make Snape's face darken.

Draco grinned—well, he could pretend that it was a frown later, if he really needed to spare Harry's feelings that much—and stepped out of the way.

"I see we have entered a regressive stage, Harry," Snape drawled to his back. "You said that you would not put yourself in danger any more without thinking, and now you have done so? How very unlike you, not to keep your promises."

Harry just turned around and glanced at Snape in distraction, exactly as if he'd been interrupted in the midst of something more important. And that's really the way he might think of it, Draco thought. Harry had to play politics right now. If Snape insisted on being inconvenient while that was happening, then he would get pushed aside until Harry was better able to deal with personal matters.

"I'm not putting myself in much danger now that it's not the full moon and I'm able to use my magic," Harry said. "One of the werewolves the Department killed was Loki's mate. Our contact in the Ministry told me that that means Loki's on the vengeance path. I don't know if I can talk him out of it, but possibly I can still soften this somehow, and keep it from all-out war between wizards and werewolves. Thus the alliance meeting."

“You should not go,” said Snape. “It is dangerous.”

Harry snorted. “I’m holding the meeting in the Forbidden Forest—choosing the ground. We’re going to be surrounded by centaurs and many snakes, and my human allies besides. Loki is the one who should be wary.”

“You should not—“

“We discussed that already, how my life isn’t fair and I shouldn’t have had to bear the burdens I had to and on and on,” said Harry, and turned away from Snape, his straight back and set shoulders dismissals if Draco had ever seen them. “I am going to. And if you don’t want to be another of those unfair burdens piled on my shoulders, then don’t interfere.”

Snape’s mouth snapped shut. Harry was already talking to Paton again, something about how whether any of the Opallines would be attending the meeting. He knew they had suffered loss in the wake of Acies’s breath, and—

“Do not be silly,” said Paton gently. “Our family will recover, and tomorrow will be the funeral for our dead. We must look to the living, and celebrate the dead, not mourn them overlong. I will come to the meeting, or Calibrid will. My children will be able to spare us by then.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you. This is going to be different than the meeting that I held on the spring equinox. That was a chance to give people a good look at me, and let them decide if I’m worth following.” He cocked his head, eyes narrowed. “This is to give those wizards and magical creatures who’ve already decided to follow me a chance to work together, and see what it really means to fight beside a vates.”

“I understand,” said Paton. “I assure you that neither my daughter nor I would have trouble with that. Calibrid is ready and willing to accept anyone who does not despise her, and I am the one who taught her.” His smile flashed with open pride for a moment. Draco wondered

what he would have to do to get Lucius to show that kind of pride in him in public.

“Thank you—“

Only then did Snape stalk out of the room. Draco hesitated, then followed him, catching up with him in the hallway. Snape whirled on him, then lowered his wand with a low curse of the non-magical kind.

“Why must he do this?” Snape whispered, all but snarling. “He knows I wish to help him, and yet he insults and dismisses me.”

Draco blinked, honestly surprised. He thinks this is about Harry not having enough compassion? He studied Snape’s slumped shoulders. “Because you’re being a prat,” he said at last. “Telling him nothing, but demanding his attention. He can’t help you. He certainly can’t force you to tell him what’s bothering you. Or, rather, he won’t. But the vast part of this is your own fault, sir.”

Snape was giving him the snarling look of a wounded animal. Draco decided it might be for the best to back off now and let Harry figure out the best way to deal with his guardian later.

Then again, he thought as he ducked back into the room where Harry was still speaking with Paton, considering how irrational all the people taking care of Harry tend to be, Lucius as a father isn’t too bad at all. Lucius was sipping tea and reading yet another account of fools trying to discredit Harry in the Daily Prophet when phoenix song chimed above his wrist. He turned his attention to it after a good minute had passed and the person speaking to him had seen the folly of interrupting Lucius Malfoy at breakfast.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Lucius.”

He raised his eyebrows. Harry’s voice, but tempered and cooled, with a tone he had never heard in it before. If Harry had been a new-

forged blade when he went to the Sanctuary, now he sounded like one ready for use.

“Harry,” he said, his eyes straying to the paper again. The photograph on the front page was one taken almost two years ago, when Harry went up against dragons in the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament. He was riding a broom, dodging and swooping among the huge bodies, looking as if he had never known fear in his life. “What brings you back to us so soon?”

“News of trouble on the Isle of Man,” said Harry. “And news of other troubles after that, once I arrived here. I am going to hold a meeting in the Forbidden Forest, in the same clearing where I met you for the Christmas celebration the year before last. I think it’s time that humans and magical creatures should meet and discuss what our alliance and our revolution entails.”

Lucius sat up straighter. Oh, he could not deny that he had not dreamed of this day since he had realized what Harry’s power might mean, and that abandoning Voldemort was a feasible choice. But he had never imagined it would arrive so soon. Harry was not ready, that much was obvious from the way he handled himself, and then he’d retreated into a place full of Light wizards. Lucius had thought the boy would be even more Light when he came back, and would need a few encounters with reality to show him the fascination of politics.

“Revolution?” he questioned delicately.

“Our world can’t stay the way it is,” said Harry. His words reminded Lucius so strongly of a speech he’d heard the Dark Lord give more than once that shivers ran down his spine and through his Dark Mark. “It’s going to slaughter many people on either side if it does.” Well, the Dark Lord had referred only to purebloods, but he had said much the same thing. “I don’t want that to happen. And I’ve realized that there are some hypocrisies in my behavior towards others that I want to correct. Will you agree to come with me and meet centaurs and werewolves face to face?”

Lucius smiled, toyed with the idea of telling Harry that working beside werewolves was less repulsive than the thought of working beside

Mudbloods, and then decided to be diplomatic. "Yes, I will. And Narcissa will, as well."

"Narcissa will what?" his wife asked, coming into the kitchen. A house elf appeared and handed her a steaming cup of tea, which she immediately took and started sipping. Lucius admired the way her blonde hair coiled around her neck for a moment. Narcissa rarely appeared less than perfectly poised, but her early-morning relaxation was lovely in its own way.

"Tell her that she's welcome, of course," said Harry, and Narcissa's eyes widened.

"I will," said Lucius, and then said his farewells and gave the spell up. He leaned across the table to take his wife's hand, raising it to his lips. "Our vates has come back," he murmured into her fingers. "What do you say to meeting with centaurs and werewolves in the middle of a Forbidden Forest clearing, while Harry stands over us and tries to convince us all to get along?"

Narcissa gave him a very faint smile. "I say that I shall have to find an appropriate gown to wear."

Hawthorn could not deny that the sound of phoenix song above her wrist lifted up her heart. "Harry," she murmured, even before the voice of the other person could begin talking.

Silence met her, which concerned her until she realized it was the silence of shock. Hawthorn laughed softly, and that prompted Harry to speak.

"How did you realize it was me?"

"I had a dream," said Hawthorn, and wandered over to look out the window of the Garden. They'd had rainy and sunny bouts of weather alternating for the past few days, and the plants she had transferred into this small side bed were doing wonderfully. Her eyes lingered near a hawthorn bush growing protectively over a clump of dragonsbane and a set of small pansies. She was able to smile and

feel an ache in her chest instead of simply feeling the ache. "A lot of dreams, the past few days. I dreamed that you would be returning."

"I never knew you were a Seer." Harry sounded half-confused, half-intrigued.

"I don't think I am." Hawthorn leaned her head on the windowsill. She knew she should be more worried. Whatever was urgent enough to summon Harry out of exile in the Sanctuary was probably just another obstacle to add to the fact that there was now a Department devoted to hunting werewolves, and a spell that could track werewolves in human form, and the serious attempts to discredit their vates. But she felt as though she were looking east and had just seen the first signs of sunrise. "I just expected that you would come back, and soon."

Harry audibly shook off the first traces of surprise. "Well, I could wish the circumstances of my return were happier."

"Tell me."

And Harry did. Hawthorn listened, and agreed that it was serious, but the hope went on living inside her. She agreed to attend the alliance meeting, of course, and then her wrist went silent, and left her to go on peering out the window at her plants.

An alliance meeting. One held only because the world is becoming so dangerous that Harry cannot afford to have those who follow him separated by ridiculous prejudices any longer.

But a meeting that addresses wounds that should have been healed long since, and breaches we need to repair. We cannot be divided against ourselves and yet endure. And our enemies could divide us, if they continue to pile on the fear talk against werewolves, and the Dark purebloods continue uninterrupted in our prejudice against Mudbloods.

She turned away from the window. This past month had been a time of retreat for her, of remembering her daughter and her husband and mourning what had been. We thought, and we rested.

Now we live.

Adalrico looked up from playing with his younger daughter. Marian was making a concentrated effort to grab hold of a jeweled bauble he dangled on a string for her, but he didn't think that was what had distracted him from her scrunched-up little face and whimpers of frustration.

Then he heard the sound again, and realized it was phoenix song coming from just above his left wrist. He picked up Marian, gave her the bauble to quiet her, and asked, "Hello?"

"Greetings, Adalrico."

He sat up straighter, even though there was no way Harry could see him. He was conscious of having something to prove to this man, at least in his own mind. Harry didn't know, of course, that Adalrico had wearied during the final days of the siege and wanted to use Darker magic on the Death Eaters than Harry would permit. Millicent had been the one to remind him of family duty, that the Bulstrodes were Harry's formal allies and ought never to betray him in such a way. Adalrico had thought about it often since then, and had been ashamed that it was his heir reprimanding him instead of the other way around.

"Harry," he murmured. "What is the matter?"

"Dragons, and werewolves, mostly," said Harry, his voice grim and wry. "But a dash of Ministry politics, and no doubt prophecy, as that seems to trouble me at every moment of my life. But for right now, an alliance meeting I want to hold in the Forbidden Forest tomorrow, with most of my allies, human and nonhuman, who agree to come. It will be in the clearing where you once met me for Christmas. Will you attend?"

Adalrico nodded, then remembered that the communication spell didn't convey gestures, only voices, and said, "Of course. Will Elfrida and my heir be welcome to attend?" Marian fussed and said, "Da!" as if she knew that meant leaving her with a friend of the family, and Adalrico jogged her on his knee to shush her. She could stay at home and be happy there. He was still wary about risking his younger

daughter in public yet, especially since Starrise might have a grudge against him for killing first one of their favored daughters and then her twin brother this spring.

“Of course,” Harry replied. “I am gathering everyone who will agree to come. And if someone won’t—” Adalrico could hear the shrug in his voice. “I suspect that will reveal who isn’t comfortable around magical creatures, and that in and of itself will tell me something about them.”

Adalrico laughed. “Very well. What time will the meeting begin?”

“You’ll want to arrive in the afternoon,” said Harry, voice serious now. “I suspect that the centaurs will get there even earlier than that.”

“Very well,” Adalrico said, and cut the spell, and then scooped up Marian and went to tell Elfrida. His wife had recently got used to leaving their daughter alone long enough to go back to work in Gringotts. He didn’t think she would object to leaving Marian with her sister, either.

Marian wriggled and fussed. “Da! Magic!” Now she was trying to grab his wand from his pocket.

“You’re not old enough yet,” Adalrico told her.

Henrietta looked up when the communication spell rang out. She knew it was the communication spell, despite the abundance of strange objects in her quarters. She’d spent enough time rustling around yesterday, poking and prodding and casting spells to be sure that none of the former occupant’s possessions did anything odd. It was almost blinding to be surrounded by Gryffindor colors—this had been Minerva McGonagall’s room for twenty years—but she supposed she’d get used to it.

“Hello?” she asked.

“Henrietta?”

Harry’s voice. Henrietta told herself that it was not dignified for a Bulstrode to smile like her favorite person in the world had just

walked into the room. The man had put her under Unbreakable Vows and smashed the last of her pride. Really, she was supposed to hate him.

But she didn't. Harry was legitimately stronger than she was, in more than just magic—the only person Henrietta had ever been able to say that about.

"Harry," she said. "What brings you back so early?"

"Alliance meeting in the Forbidden Forest tomorrow," said Harry. "I need you to attend, unless you're averse to magical creatures."

Henrietta smiled and glanced down at the pamphlet that lay on the desk, advertising the Augurey sanctuary Harry had had her give some money to fund and found. "Not anymore," she said.

"Good. Now, as you're approaching from the north, you'll notice a clearing not far away from the path. You should be able to see it clearly. Other people will be there already; I've asked Hawthorn and Adalrico to arrive early."

"Harry," she interrupted then, thinking she should correct a misconception, "I won't be approaching from the north. I'll be approaching from the south."

She heard the frown in his voice. "Why? You're flying?"

"No." Henrietta sat back and sprang her surprise. "Because I have a teaching post at Hogwarts now, so I'll just walk from there."

A long, stunned silence, and then Harry said, "But—what post did McGonagall hire you for?"

"Transfiguration," Henrietta said smugly, shaking her hair over her shoulders. "I've been studying it for months, thinking that she might need someone to help her with it this year. She did manage to jury-rig it last year, but I know a lot of people were unhappy with that, especially the parents of the students in the NEWT Transfiguration classes. I knew she could use an extra pair of hands."

“But your daughter—“

“Is no longer here,” Henrietta pointed out smoothly. “You arranged for her to have private lesson with that tutor in France, remember?” She knew Edith had begged Harry to go to France almost the moment her mother came to the castle during the battle, technically keeping the word of her Vows by not seeing Edith face-to-face. And now she was gone, and Henrietta was free to be near her young Lord. Far too many assassination attempts had happened on Hogwarts’s grounds. She was here to make sure they became a thing of the past.

“That’s true,” Harry murmured, sounding as if he were thinking deeply. “But you aren’t teaching under your own name? I think Pharos Starrise would raise a stink about a Bulstrode professor.”

“No. My name is Hilda Belluspersona.” Henrietta lifted her head and examined herself in the mirror on the opposite wall. “You’d be surprised. I look much younger, and my eyes are blue now.”

“And your name means beautiful disguise,” Harry muttered. “And you still think someone won’t figure it out?”

“None of us can help what our names are,” Henrietta said mildly.

Harry sighed. “Coming from the south, then, you’ll take the path on the way in, and you should look for a twisted tree. Or just wait for the centaurs. I was at Hogwarts this morning, to speak with their leader. They should find you and guide you in.”

“Of course, Harry.” Henrietta hummed happily under her breath as their communication spell finished.

Really, it’s not the done thing for a Lord who treats his companions decently to go off at the shake of a Kneazle’s tail, she thought, as she got up and once more examined her face in the mirror. I am so glad he’s back.

Ignifer did not know what time it was, only that, after last night, it was far too early. She was never drinking butterbeer again. She buried her head under the pillows and ignored the chiming.

Then she heard someone say, "Hello, Harry."

Panicking, Ignifer sat up, and then groaned and grabbed her head as the light and noise outside her blanket cocoon assaulted her. She massaged her temples and moaned, all the while squinting frantically, to see if her vates was really going to see her in this state.

All she saw was Honoria sitting on the end of the bed, smirking at her wickedly as she spoke into her wrist. "An alliance meeting? Of course. And you don't need to speak to Ignifer, I'll tell her." A pause, during which Harry's voice emerged too low for Ignifer to hear, and Honoria said, "Oh, but it's no trouble, Harry, really. She's sitting no more than four feet away from me, after all."

Ignifer made a grab for her. Her head pounded so hard she not only lost her balance, but fell full-length to sprawl on the bed. Honoria leaped away and danced gleefully around the room.

"You ought to see her," she went on, unhelpfully, to Harry. "Her hair's all a tangle, and she looks as though someone slammed her across the face with a crowbar, and she looks so thoroughly shagged, you have no idea—"

Ignifer snarled, and flames curled around her. Honoria squeaked in mock fright before conjuring the illusion of a bucket of water to tip on Ignifer's head. She was good enough at tactile glamours that it really felt like ice water, damn her.

"Tomorrow in the Forbidden Forest, centaurs will guide us in," said Honoria. "Of course. I understand, Harry. Thank you!" She ended the communication spell as Ignifer called fire into her hand and tossed it forward in a miniature fireball. All of Ignifer's walls and most of the furniture were spelled to resist flame magic, after numerous almost-accidents, but Honoria wasn't. She changed into her sea-mew Animagus form instead, and cackled triumphantly as she soared above the ball.

Ignifer scowled as the other witch dived and turned around the room, laughing loudly enough to make her headache worse. She liked

Honoria, really she did, and the sex was fantastic, but there were times she resented taking up with a master illusionist who was also a bloody Animagus with a ridiculous sense of humor, and this was one of those times.

Thomas Rhangnara was deeply concerned. In front of him sprawled several Daily Prophet articles from various days during the last month and a half. The later ones were more and more wildly fantastic, and reported events that contradicted the reports of the earlier ones, during which they'd said, accurately, that Harry mercy-killed children during the Battle of Hogwarts and lured Voldemort into a trap. The later ones stated that he'd murdered children, and that he hadn't lured Voldemort into a trap so much as done it to show off his skills.

Obviously, this was the result of a lack of proper research. Thomas was writing the Prophet's editors with the information that they would need to correct the problem and print a retraction. He was sure they would be grateful for the help.

His wrist sang. Thomas looked at it with awe. He always enjoyed the moments most before a new communication began, because it could be anyone on the other side. Perhaps Voldemort had even figured out a way to talk to them. "Hello?" he asked eagerly.

"Hello, Thomas."

Harry. Thomas barely managed to restrain a sigh of satisfaction. Now Harry was back in the world, and the Prophet would be even swifter to print the retraction. Of course they wouldn't want a wizard of Harry's power on their tails. And Thomas could tell Harry all about his news.

"Guess what's going to happen in a few weeks, Harry?" he asked eagerly.

"I don't know, Thomas." Harry sounded almost like Priscilla and his children, Thomas thought, willing to listen if a little puzzled. That was a good thing. That meant he didn't have to be afraid that he was using up the vates's valuable time by burbling along. If Harry was

annoyed and needed to talk about something else, then surely he would ask Thomas to stop and let him get to the point.

“We’re releasing the news about GUTOEKOM,” said Thomas, and looked proudly at the other pile of paper on the end of his desk, which was corrected and uncorrected proofs for the report. “We were going to let it out earlier, of course, but we made a few new discoveries, and found a few mistakes we needed to correct. For example, did you know that the Dark Lord Fallen was Muggleborn?”

“What?” Harry asked in shock. “No, he wasn’t. He was the bastard son of a pureblood family, and he hated Muggleborns, just like Voldemort does.”

“I don’t care what he said,” Thomas said. “People lie about themselves, especially Dark Lords.” He gave a little shrug. He had never seen the point of lying himself. Research proceeded more easily where truth was involved. “He was Muggleborn. He just tried to cover that up by proclaiming himself the son of an illustrious heritage. Of course, the pureblood family he said he came from, the Princes, denied it, but they were proud enough that they weren’t going to admit to a bastard, so the denial was just what everyone expected from them.”

“So that means that old myth about no Muggleborns being powerful enough to be Lords and Ladies really is a myth,” Harry mused.

“Exactly!” Thomas beamed, glad he saw the importance. “And we’ve looked into more about how magic interacts with bloodline. There’s fascinating evidence that how the mother feels about the child in her womb can affect how much magic they’re born with. That would explain why so many pureblood children born after a husband cheated on his wife were Squibs. And of course almost any child that comes from a raped witch is a Squib. There’s not enough evidence to say that this happens all the time yet, but it’s one of those factors that Petrovitch identified, and which has borne fruit.” He reached over and shuffled through some of the papers, looking for something else inspiring to tell Harry. “Oh! And of course there’s Muggleborn or Muggle blood in most of the pureblood lines.”

It sounded as if Harry had choked. “Do tell,” he said faintly.

“Oh, yes,” Thomas said, nodding rapidly. “The Blacks, in particular. When they interbred too closely, Squibs started being born. Then a few of the Black women sought out Muggle or Muggleborn lovers and had children they dearly wished wouldn’t be Squibs—the power of a mother wishing, you know—and some of them weren’t and regenerated the line. And that’s to say nothing of what was going on in the Malfoy line.” Harry definitely choked this time, but he sounded all right, so Thomas rambled on. ‘There were a few generations where neither the men nor the women could stay in bed with their lawfully wedded spouses. And of course they hid things, but if they had a child, they usually brought it back into the family.’ Thomas chuckled, because he thought this was amusing. “There’s a high chance that Abraxas Malfoy himself was the bastard child of his father and a Muggleborn woman, you know.”

Harry sounded as if he were wheezing.

“I can’t wait to publish this,” Thomas ended happily. “People will have to listen, and stop being idiots. Now, what did you want to talk to me about?”

Harry gave him the directions for the alliance meeting, the time, and how to reach it. He sounded breathless as he did it. Thomas frowned. He didn’t want their vates to get sick. “Try to get some rest and heal that cold you have, Harry,” he advised him kindly. “Get your partner to rub your back.”

“Right,” Harry said faintly. “I’ll do that.”

Owen tapped his fingers idly against the side of his leg. Harry had just contacted him and asked if he and Michael would consider attending the alliance meeting in the Forbidden Forest. And of course Owen had said yes. He and Michael were both the sworn companions of their vates, and one did that kind of thing when one was a sworn companion.

It did mean that events were running faster and further than they had predicted when they thought Harry would be in the Sanctuary for two

months. And Owen wondered if their mother was yet recovered enough from grief for their father for he and Michael to take up their duties of guarding and defending Harry again. There was no question that they would be attending Hogwarts in the autumn for their seventh and final year, but that was the autumn.

He looked across the room, where Medusa sat with Michael, playing a game of chess. Michael caught his eye and nodded very slightly, his way of saying that he thought their mother was fine.

Owen loved his brother, but he did not always trust his judgment. Owen was the one who had become head of the family when their father Charles died, and not only because he was their father's magical heir and had always been the more responsible, guiding and protecting his younger twin. Michael also had a tendency to get so wrapped up in arcane trivialities that he missed the larger picture. Owen hadn't been surprised at all when, as they sat under the Sorting Hat a few days after the Midsummer battle, the Hat had placed Michael firmly in Ravenclaw, while it had sent him to Slytherin.

And he thought that Michael had certain—personal—reasons for wanting to see Harry, and specifically Harry's partner Draco Malfoy, again that made him likely to rush.

Owen studied his mother's face. Medusa Rosier-Henlin, once Medusa Bulstrode, had aged since her husband's death, but now she looked like a queen instead of the young princess she had always appeared when their father was alive. She played with more quiet intensity than she had been used to showing when she danced around Michael with a skillet, but was that a bad thing? Owen thought not. And the way she laughed, if more subdued than before, was at least animated enough to count as laughter. And she no longer spent any days lying in bed, as she had at first.

Medusa turned her head then, and caught his gaze. Owen started to flush and duck his head, but Medusa held his gaze straight on, challenging him, and then sat back, indicating the chess game was done.

"I'll have you know, Owen Rosier-Henlin," she said, adopting the tone that always made Owen feel about five years old, "that I have been managing for myself far longer than you boys have been alive."

Owen nodded unwillingly. What little he knew about the Bulstrode family indicated they hadn't been—close.

"I can manage without you," said Medusa. "Your father wouldn't want me to shut myself up in a tomb, and I'm not going to." She looked sternly back and forth between them. "And you have a stronger allegiance than to me." Her gaze fell on Owen's left forearm, cut with the lightning bolt mark that marked his oath-vow to Harry. "Go and serve your vates, your Lord. I demand that of you, as your mother and as an older witch whom you respect." She stood.

"But what are you going to do, shut up here all day?" Owen had to ask. Medusa had been a witch whose life was wrapped up in her husband and children. It was hard to imagine her here alone.

"I didn't say I would stay shut up here," Medusa almost snapped. "And—" She hesitated a long moment, then shook her head. "At first I wasn't sure," she murmured. "And then I couldn't bear to mention it, because it seemed like so little compensation after such a crushing blow. And then I thought how horrible it was that your father wasn't alive to see this. But I'm recovered from that now. I have to go on." She drew her wand and tapped herself. "Coarguo!"

Owen blinked. He knew the spell—one often used at Durmstrang to dispel glamours and reveal the presence of dangerous spells in a room. He didn't know why his mother would be using it on herself.

The blue mist he was familiar with swirled around Medusa, and then stormed away, forming a shadow in the air. Owen squinted. There was his mother.

And there was a smaller shadow within hers, resting in her belly.

Owen turned and stared at her.

Medusa's smile was bitter. "I conceived not long before your father went to the Midsummer battle," she murmured. "And so long after we'd given up hope of having another child." She bowed her head. "But it doesn't matter that Charles won't be here to see her, because he won't, and I have to accept that. I'll be sure to tell her tales of her father, so that she will know he was brave, and would have loved her."

Michael was the first to hug their mother, which was appropriate, as he'd always been closer to her. Medusa hugged him, and then she began to shake, and then the tears came.

Owen stood and went over to them a moment later, hoping, fiercely, that the war would not claim his mother and his infant sister as sacrifices.

Harry arrived at the clearing in the Forbidden Forest with his magic held sternly under wraps and the taste of ashes in his mouth. He and Snape had had another argument over his coming here. It had started out with Snape trying to reason with him, which Harry supposed was a positive sign, and then degenerated into Snape ordering him not to go. Harry had answered that with the sneer it deserved.

I don't want more bad blood between us, damn it! he thought, running his hand over his scar. I don't want any bad blood at all. I want to be able to trust him, to rely on him, to help heal him. But if he won't do that right now, then he won't do that right now. At least it seems that Joseph is having something of an effect on him.

He pushed thoughts of Snape into the Occlumency pools and held out his arm to Draco. Draco grinned slightly and interwove his arm with Harry's. It had been his idea that Harry muffle his magic and go in like that, to see what the expressions on his allies' faces would be when he released it. Harry had wanted to oppose him, but it was a move that made tactical sense. There still might be wizards here—Harry was sure Lucius was one—who had remaining prejudices against the magical creatures, or who thought they might be able to control him. A sudden show of magic would set them off balance, and warn them that he was no one's pawn.

Not anymore.

He swept into the clearing with Draco, coming in beneath two trees with arched branches. The loose circle around the glade, wizards neatly arranged on one side, and magical creatures—including, Harry saw with relief, a shimmer that was probably Dobby—on the other, turned towards him.

Harry let the bindings on his magic go.

Lucius saw Harry, and felt his magic tighten a circle of buzzing pain around his head, and was suddenly carried back more than twenty years, to a much darker night than this. He was young, and looking to carve his own path in the world, and meeting the Dark Lord for the first time.

Voldemort had come in with his magic shielded, just as Harry had done, but even more anonymous in the sea of black cloaks and white masks. Then he had released it. And Lucius had understood in a moment why wizards could be unconsciously compelled to follow Lords and Ladies, even the ones who seemed destined to lose their wars.

The magic was life. It flowed everywhere, like dark water, and whispered of change and adoration of that change. It whispered of being in control, instead of helplessly swept along by traditions and Muggle-lovers. Lucius had been dazed, dazzled, awed. Not even Dumbledore was that strong, with that sense of sheer, vital springtime and renewal to his magic.

And the Dark Lord had been sane then. He wasn't exactly charismatic, but he didn't need to be. He was fascinating, which was better. Steeped in Dark magic, in old studies, in old secrets, he reeked of ancient knowledge, and he told the truth in a fervent voice, and his magic pulled at them all as the moon pulled at the tide.

The records said Death Eaters had followed Tom Riddle because he was a power-crazed madman, and they had been mad, too, and wanted to share in that power. Lucius knew some who had fit that

description—Evan Rosier for the former, Bellatrix Black Lestrange for the second. But more of them yet had bowed their necks because of something impossible to explain unless one was close to Voldemort and had at least the potential of being loyal to him. They were his because they could sense that this was someone who could change the world as an earthquake would—a storm in a human being. And they could commune with that power as they never could with an ordinary storm.

Lucius had thought he was giving that up when he swore allegiance to Harry. He did not really regret it, not when Voldemort had returned as the mad thing he was. There were subtler pleasures to be had, like making a young Lord dance to his tune.

Now he felt it again.

Harry's magic was painful, but it commanded Lucius's attention like a blade against his throat. He was awake, for the first time in a decade. His nerves balanced on the edge of a knife. He breathed, and felt the breath sting in his lungs, and relished it. He knew he was in the presence of a leader ready to go to war.

That was what Harry was, no matter what he claimed.

Harry locked his gaze on Lucius's from across the clearing, and inclined his head. His green eyes were visible from that distance, thanks to the dark green robes that Draco had probably persuaded him to wear, and his hair was bound back from his forehead, as much as it could be, with a silver band that was probably another of Draco's touches. His scar slashed across his brow, vivid as any normal lightning bolt in the sky.

Lucius told himself that Malfoys did not fall to one knee for anyone born a Potter. But he gave a deeper bow than he ever had before.

And Harry accepted it without the flicker of an eye.

Lucius fought the urge to stamp a foot in delight, to cast a curse, to turn and kiss Narcissa. Things were beginning, things were beginning again, and he was in the middle of them.

And this time, his leader was not mad.

He could fall, though.

Lucius suddenly had a vested, personal interest, one that had nothing to do with Harry's importance to Draco or the future of his family, in stopping that from happening.

Ignifer blinked. If someone had told her, a year ago, that she would be appreciating the effect of Lord-level power washing over her, she would have told them they were mad. She did not appreciate being controlled, not since her father. She had endured sixteen years of exile from her family, and an infertility curse, rather than give in and do what he wanted.

But now she felt the potential to command lapping on her arms, curling around her throat, sniffing at her as if to assess what she could do and what part she could play in the war.

It was—not unpleasant.

Ignifer studied Harry with narrowed eyes. There is nothing that says he cannot make a wrong decision. There is nothing that says he cannot fall, or that he will be as good a leader in this as in anything else.

But belonging is nice.

A hand squeezed her own. Ignifer turned her head and saw Honoria beside her, eyes bright with mischief—and, more, understanding. Her illusions created a dog with Ignifer's yellow eyes on one shoulder, rolling over, showing its belly, and begging to be petted. Ignifer snorted and looked away in disdain.

She did let her hand squeeze back on Honoria's, though.

Henrietta swept the clearing with a proud glance. It was perfectly obvious to her what effect Harry's magic was having on all the people around her, and also perfectly obvious that some of those people had

not been convinced, before, that following Harry was the best thing to do.

Idiots. Really. Did they think that a wizard capable of making me want to follow him was a weakling?

Perhaps not a weakling, she thought, taking in the complex expressions on so many faces, but certainly not this overwhelming presence he was now. They had sometimes seen a child, an abused one. They had sometimes seen one who risked his life for no real reason, particularly where Evan Rosier was concerned. And they had sometimes seen a hero, as on Midwinter, but not someone particularly human, particularly easy to relate to.

Here was someone who had settled into his magic, and would use it to defend himself if he had to.

And use it to defend others, too.

They understand now, Henrietta thought, as she watched Lucius dip his head in a deep bow and Laura Gloryflower nod slowly, as though seeing Harry was not her child to protect. It is better to be within his circle than without. He will not hesitate to protect them as fiercely as he protects himself.

And now, there is no doubt that he can do it.

Henrietta settled back, with her arms casually folded, and smiled, and smiled.

The first thing Harry noticed was that the werewolves weren't there yet. He had received a notice from Wilmot that they would be attending, but he had also told himself that he wasn't going to wait on Loki, and that was true. It was already early evening, the sun just beginning its western descent. He at once began his speech.

"I would like to make this a formal alliance," he said. "I would like to know that I can take everyone here into my trust and faith, and treat you all as confidants in the matter of my plans. Therefore, I am asking

everyone here who has not actually sworn an oath to me to do so. And I will swear one back to you.”

“The terms of the alliance?” That was John Smythe-Blyton, Tybalt Starrise’s joined partner. Harry noticed that his eyes were slightly shadowed. Perhaps he thought the risks Tybalt had taken without any formal oath were already severe enough, without adding that binding into it.

“Welcome is one of the first and foremost principles.” Harry shifted his weight. On Draco’s advice, he’d prepared the speech, but it still felt false to use it. He wanted to speak his mind without caring what effect the words had, because if someone truly hated what he was saying, then why would they want to join the alliance anyway?

But he knew he had to be political, measured, diplomatic. He’d argued with Snape and had him stay behind because he was convinced that Snape couldn’t be any of those things.

I don’t want to sacrifice who I am by becoming political, though, he thought, lifting his head. And it would be so easy to do. I’ll have to keep an eye on myself.

“We’ll welcome those who use both Light and Dark magic.” Harry looked at Thomas Rhangnara, then Laura Gloryflower. “Those who have committed crimes and sincerely repented.” A glance at the former Death Eaters in the group. “Both humans and magical creatures.” He let his gaze slide over to the centaurs. A large male Harry knew as Bone folded his arms and nodded, as though to signal his people’s commitment to the alliance. “Muggleborns, and halfbloods, and purebloods, and Squibs.” Calibrid Opalline—whom Harry suspected had in part attended because her father was intent on getting her to think about something beyond all the wounded and dead in the house—held her head back and smiled faintly when a few gazes turned to her. She didn’t look as though she would back down if anyone tried to tell her off for being a Squib. Harry just hoped the rest had the same impression of her. “There’s no place for prejudices here.”

“And I suppose that you expect us to free all our house elves tomorrow?” That was Lucius, recovering from the shock he’d showed when Harry first entered the clearing, and returning to his usual bored, haughty tone.

“Of course not,” Harry said. “I expect you to consider the possibility, to be open to arguing about it, rather than blindly dismissing the idea. What I want to make us different from those outside the alliance, other than our welcome, is our ability to think. That may restrict the first principle. I would not let someone into the alliance who seemed likely to hurt all the others already here.” He could feel himself relaxing. Some of this was prepared, but some was in response to the questions of those around him. He preferred that, really, a dialogue rather than a monologue or a speech. “But we won’t simply dismiss someone out of hand because she carries the werewolf curse or because he had a Muggle for a parent. There are plenty of sectors of wizarding society who do.

“If we look over recent wizarding history, it seems to me that our greatest sin is not thinking. Sometimes, as with the Ministry of late, we allow fear to control our actions. Other times, we’re so concerned over status that we don’t see that we’re losing true power. And at still others, we’ve forgotten history, and we prefer to hide from it when reminded.” He nodded at the centaurs, but he was thinking about the Grand Unified Theory as well, and the absolute chaos that Thomas’s theory was going to cause when his group published it. Harry found that he was glad, chaos or not. It would at least force people to consider. Lucius was likely entirely ignorant of the possible Muggleborn heritage in his own family, and thus felt free to despise them without pause. Confronted with it, he could try to hide his head in the sand, but Harry wouldn’t allow that, and he didn’t think Draco and Narcissa would, either. “If you become part of this alliance, you are going to have to step away from that all-too-common strategy. You don’t need to like everyone else in the alliance, but you need to fight beside them. You’ll also need to examine your own actions, and their consequences. No blind vengeance-taking will be part of this, of course, but it’s not the only part.”

“And yet you still don’t necessarily want us to free our house elves?” Adalrico sounded as if he were having a little trouble understanding the contradiction.

With a small smile, Harry shook his head. “No. Think, argue, debate, question. Those are what I want you to do. But you haven’t sworn to help the house elves achieve freedom. I have.”

He turned towards the shimmer that was Dobby. A pair of large golden eyes formed in the mist and looked out at him.

“I have sworn that,” said Harry, “and it’s time for me to stop living in the midst of hypocrisy. I am vates. I have cast my own cleaning charms for the past year, but I’ve still lived on house elf labor, eating food they prepared in Hogwarts. I am going to stop that now. I promise you, Dobby, and if any others of your kindred were free yet, I would promise them as well.” He held up his hand, and the ring Draco had given him on Walpurgis Night flashed. “I will never live by house elf labor again. I am going to see what food is available in Hogsmeade, and have it sent by owl to the castle. And when I live somewhere else, I plan to do the same thing.”

The people all around the circle were staring at him, except the Many, who made small hissing noises as they talked about their own important matters, and the centaurs, who stamped a few hooves gravely in approval. Dobby’s golden eyes blinked.

“I have been waiting for that,” he said at last, in a voice like eerie flute music.

Harry nodded. “Yes. It’s to my discredit that I’ve waited so long. But it’s sworn now.” He turned to Lucius and Adalrico, though he spoke to the whole circle if they wanted to listen. “That is the kind of thing I would like to see happen everywhere. Not at once. I am not going to force anyone to free their house elves. But I will bargain where I can.”

“Not everyone will be able to do what you do,” Hawthorn told him. Her face was pale. Harry wondered if she had not anticipated his making such a large change in the way he lived his own life. “Some people can’t afford it.”

Harry nodded again. "I know that. That means that solution won't work for everyone. But I can afford it." The thought of the Black fortune, just lying around in its vaults and not being used for anything productive, bothered him. Rather like the way I now think about my magic, I suppose. "And I'm the one who has reason to swear that oath, and try to smooth out the contradictions in the life I lead."

"So," said Owen, sounding as if he were trying to bring them all back to the main point of the meeting. "Welcome and thinking. What else?"

"A willingness to rise," Harry said. "Against falsehood, against stupidity, against preconceptions. My first target is the Ministry and the way it treats werewolves, because I think it the most urgent cause right now. They are dying in the streets. I am going to be trying my hand at inventing a cure for lycanthropy." He had his dreams to thank for that, he thought. Sometimes his dreaming mind knew what he needed before he himself did. "I'll also offer my protection to any werewolf that wants it. And, of course, any werewolf who wants to can join the alliance, as long as he or she agrees to swearing to all the other principles."

"I am glad to hear you say that," said a voice from the opposite side of the clearing Harry had entered on.

Loki. Harry turned on one heel, magic up and ready to defend if necessary. But Loki simply appeared, walking at the head of a file of werewolves, many more than Harry had seen accompany him before. Harry narrowed his eyes, noticing his allies' tension as people kept piling up behind Loki. There were perhaps forty men and women there. In the back, Harry thought he'd caught a glimpse of Remus.

All of his pack?

He looked at Loki then, and the accusation he wanted to speak stuck in his throat. Loki's face had lost the calm, amused look it had worn most of the times Harry had seen him in the past. He appeared to have lost weight. His eyes were fiercely amber, burning as if the full moon had been yesterday instead of a few days ago, and hunger appeared to have sharpened his cheekbone and his fangs.

“What is the meaning of this, Loki?” Harry asked quietly.

“Did you mean what you said?” Loki asked, and the tone was sharp enough that Harry saw a few of his allies stir and reach for their wands. “The werewolves who agree to your principles can have your protection?”

“I meant it,” Harry said, lifting his head. He wondered if Loki was going to challenge him in public, accuse him of not doing enough for his pack. If he did, then Harry was ready to meet that challenge.

But Loki only nodded, and then gestured. His pack flowed forward around him. More than one wand rose then, but no one fired a curse. Harry commended his allies on their self-control as the werewolves filled the clearing, the empty space between the side of the wizards and the side of the magical creatures. That was rather appropriate, now that Harry thought about it.

Loki tilted his head back and began to wail. That was the only way Harry could describe his howl. It was a sound of deep loss and grief, where every werewolf’s howl he had heard before was wild and rage-filled. The pack threw their heads back, too, and responded in perfect time, their voices intermingling until Harry could hear one of his allies screaming, as if to drown out the noise.

It ceased in an instant, and Loki said, “It is enough. I signal from the path alone, and the pack takes another. It is done. Done, and done, and thrice done.” His voice shook with power on those last words.

Cold, fierce white light filled the whole of the clearing—the light of the full moon, Harry thought. He started to gather his magic, just in case the werewolves had discovered a spell that allowed them to transform without the moon in the sky, but then he realized the light was occurring in thin streams only. It connected the werewolves in a shining web that bound them to Loki, to a flickering line on his hair that Harry thought looked like a crown.

Then the crown whipped from Loki's head towards him. Harry had time for a startled duck before it settled around his neck like a torque. The Many snake, coiled just under it, hissed at it.

"I give my pack into your protection, vates," Loki said. "They have suffered enough. Two dead, and one imprisoned, and that is enough. They are yours to defend, yours to keep."

"I cannot wear a web," Harry said. "I am vates."

Loki's face lit with a wistful smile. "Does every leader wear a web?" he countered. "No, vates. They are tied together because they are pack, and they look to you as alpha now. That is all. I simply chose to surrender my position to you rather than to some youngster looking to start a fight."

Harry swallowed. He wasn't sure this was much better. The light around his throat felt as cold as any actual band of metal, any bond. "And why would you do that?"

"The ways of an accepted pack are tied to debts and bonds," said Loki, lowering his head slightly. "But the greatest of the bonds is the mate-bond. I hunt for Gudrun. I shall visit each of her three killers on each of the three full moons upcoming. I shall make sure they do not look human when I am done." Fading sunlight flashed off his teeth.

"That will make things worse for your werewolves!" Harry took a step forward, barely noticing how the pack swayed in the wake of his anger. "Don't you care about that?"

"Gudrun is dead," said Loki, calmly, simply. "That puts an automatic limit to the number of things I care about. But feel free to tell anyone who asks that I am separated from my pack, vates. That is true. I am not fit for the responsibility of leading them when I am consumed with vengeance, and the path I walk now is only wide enough for one, not all of them. So I put them where they will be protected, and pursue my own path." He lifted a hand and folded three fingers down. "August, September, October. Those are the months I shall hunt. And then comes November, and comes the last debt to be paid. We share

something with you wizards, you see, Harry.” His teeth flashed in a mocking smile now. “Last time pays for all.”

Harry would have reached out for him, tried to hold him still, convince him not to go, but Loki vanished, wrapped in magic that made him invisible to any senses. Harry reached out anyway. Now that Loki had given up his leadership, he ought not to be able to use pack magic anymore, if Harry understood the concept.

“Do not.”

Harry looked down. A young woman with long, ragged dark hair was rising on her knees, putting out a hand towards him. She shook her head. “He invokes a willing sacrifice,” she said. “He will pay for all in November, but until then, he cannot be stopped. He walks alone, and hunts alone, and you cannot sense him—more even than if he still had the pack magic.”

Harry cursed under his breath, and reined in both the anger and his sloshing magic. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Camellia.” She tilted her head to regard him, wary, one eye peering up through the strands of hair.

“Do you want to be here?” he asked. “Actually bound to me? I’m not even a werewolf.”

“We aren’t bound in the way you think we are,” she told him. “We can disobey you, and certainly think our own thoughts. But we rely on you for protection, and in return, we will protect you. We will attack your enemies, and help your friends, and—” She hesitated for a long moment, as if it hurt to think in human terms, then finished. “And swear to be part of your alliance.”

Harry nodded. “Very well, then.” He looked up and around at his allies, human and centaur and Many snake and other. “If you consent to be a part of this alliance, which I am going to call the Alliance of Sun and Shadow because of the mingled Light and Dark nature of it, then I will ask you to speak these words. I won’t use blood, because I know that blood oaths offend the principles of some of those here.” Not to

mention that there are old myths about what a werewolf's blood can do to non-werewolves.

He saw most of the people present nodding, or stamping their hooves. Harry translated the words into Parseltongue, and the hive tangled around each other in enthusiasm.

"You know that we will swear to the one who saved our children from being bound," they told him.

Harry nodded, and began to recite, trying to tell himself that the words did not sound pretentious, that this needed to be said.

"I swear to be part of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow until I can in good conscience be part of it no longer. I swear to hold loyalty and allegiance to my allies, no matter who they are, no matter how much magic they have, no matter what kind of magic they use." He heard Draco's voice from beside him, strong and clear and confident, and the centaurs' voices, a rumbling basso that shook the ground. "I swear to hold the space of my own mind sacred, to make decisions as best as I can based on thought instead of reaction, to test my own beliefs until they shatter or until they prove themselves solid. I swear not to let fear rule me. I swear to walk among interacting freedoms, to study the impact of my own free will on others', and to think of the consequences of my actions."

He wondered if anyone noticed that he'd chosen to base his oaths on the legendary virtues of the four Hogwarts Houses, or at least one for each House: Hufflepuff loyalty, Ravenclaw intelligence, Gryffindor courage, and Slytherin self-consideration. Draco was shooting him a sly smile that said he'd noticed, but, of course, Harry had talked over this oath with Draco beforehand.

A few of his allies blinked around in the wake of the oath, and one of the werewolves ventured, "I expected magic to bind us."

"This doesn't have the compulsion factor of an Unbreakable Vow," Harry told him. He was trying to avoid looking towards Remus. He just—couldn't deal with him right now. "I do expect you to keep it. If you betray the alliance to its enemies, I will drain your magic." He

didn't add much force to the threat. The threat by itself should be enough. "If you feel that you can no longer follow its principles, I expect you to tell me and withdraw, not deceive me."

Some of his allies still blinked. Harry stifled an impatient sigh. Don't they understand? This has to be something they freely choose or not at all.

"The first strike is against the Ministry," he said. "I will call on you as I need you." He bowed his head. "Thank you for coming here tonight."

As the meeting began to break up, Harry turned to the werewolves. They were the largest problem. He knew where he would take them to shelter them—the Black houses, obedient only to him while Regulus was gone and guarded behind powerful wards. But, Merlin, another complication.

Seeing the hesitancy in their eyes, though, he reminded himself that he wasn't the only person affected here, and managed to offer them a smile of welcome.

"The first place I'll take you is called Copley-by-the-Sea," he announced. "It's in Cornwall, on the coast of the Atlantic, and the cliffs above it are dramatic. If you'll picture gray cliffs in your head, falling sheerly to the sea..."

He could almost feel their attention centering on him as he spoke, testing his strength, learning how to regard him. There was the same sensation from many of the other eyes in the clearing. And, of course, there was Remus, and Loki running wild.

Harry could feel the challenges that would be coming.

He braced himself to meet them.

Chapter Eight: Theory, Meet Practice

Draco came down the main staircase in Copley-by-the-Sea feeling as if someone had run a hand through all his hair and made it stand on end. He hadn't slept well. It wasn't the bare stone room or the unfamiliar bed, thick with hastily dusted curtains, that had hampered that. The smells, of all things, had got to him. Draco preferred the heavy rose-smell that hung around Harry, at least to his nose, to the scents of salt and spray. The heavy booming of the waves as they struck the cliff the house was carved into hadn't helped, either.

He paused when he reached the bottom of the staircase. It opened into a wide room, like the one where they had celebrated Christmas though several floors higher, with windows that gazed out on the ocean. There were several stone pillars scattered throughout it, which Draco thought were meant to serve as perches for owls, or plinths for objects now missing. Otherwise, the room was bare and comfortless.

And Harry stood by one of the windows, in the same clothes he'd worn last night, staring out expectantly.

"Harry."

Harry started and looked over his shoulder. "Oh, hullo, Draco."

One of us has to say it. Draco remained silent, waiting. But Harry only turned around again and stared back out the window, as if he didn't notice the tension in the air. A moment later, he exclaimed and held out his arm.

A barn owl, looking as ruffled as Draco felt, clung to his jumper when Harry pulled his arm back inside. He smiled as his Levitation Charm pulled the letter from its leg, even though the owl hooted nervously and shifted from talon to talon at the nearness of the invisible magic. Harry unrolled the letter via a complicated process half-magic and half-hand, and which Draco couldn't see well from this angle. He took a step nearer just as Harry let the letter roll shut and grinned up at him.

"She'll do it," he told Draco.

Draco blinked a bit, then said, in a tone meant to remind Harry that he didn't have a bloody clue what he was talking about, "Who will do what?"

"Skeeter is going to arrange to hold a public interview with me," said Harry, "at the Ministry. She won't tell anyone until a few minutes before, so our audience will be whoever's there at the time. That ought to provide a nicely varied set of ears. And of course I'll be taking Veritaserum in front of everyone, too." He looked around in distraction. "I had parchment and a quill right here, I could swear that I did. I have to write her back and let her know that half past ten will be fine."

"I know you have an amulet you can use to summon her," Draco said, frowning. "Why didn't you just use that?"

"Because then she would have had to fly or Apparate here, and talk to me about the plan, and then go arrange matters," said Harry. He murmured something Draco thought was "Accio parchment!", and a folded scroll came flying over to him. He snatched it, badly unsettling the owl, which fluttered away to wait on the windowsill until he was done. "This way, she could just stay in London and arrange things immediately. And we can have the interview more quickly." He gave Draco another smile that might have melted Draco's defenses if he weren't so concerned. "Skeeter's smart. She'll know who to contact."

Draco wondered how to put this politely, and finally said, "Harry."

"Hmmm?" Harry was holding the parchment flat with the stump of his left wrist, while scribbling the message rapidly with his right hand. Draco narrowed his eyes. That's another thing that he was going to work on, too, getting his hand back. I know that he broke one curse on his wrist, but then he never tried to break anything else. Combined with what he just did, that's not a good sign.

"Did you go to sleep last night?"

Harry looked up with wide eyes, arrested for a moment, and then blinked. "Um. No." He lifted his left shoulder in a shrug. He was already writing again. "I forgot?"

"We've talked about this," said Draco, feeling a stir of disgust in his belly. He really didn't like scolding Harry to do elementary things like eat and sleep. If nothing else, they made him sound like a parent, and he wanted to be Harry's partner, not his parent. Offering comfort when Harry was in trouble was one thing, but by now, he should know better than to run himself into the ground. "You need to sleep, no matter how exciting the day was."

"I literally couldn't," Harry said, with a lightness that made Draco grit his teeth. "I have too many plans." He finished the letter and strode across the room to the barn owl, securing the message to its leg. The owl hooted, and Harry reached into his robe pocket, holding out what looked like a crumbling piece of toast. The owl ate a few bites before it launched itself out the window again, already more dignified than when it'd arrived. "And I was getting to know the werewolves. There are all sorts of things about accepted werewolf packs I never knew." He spun around, resting with his elbows on the stone, and grinned at Draco. The gray light through the window made his face appear to glow with an unhealthy pallor. "Did you know they prefer to sleep all in one big tumble? A literal puppy-pile. And they know exactly where every member of the pack is, physically, in the room at all times. They can't really surprise each other, but they keep trying."

Draco scowled. Bloody werewolves. He'd managed to forget about them, actually, for one blissful moment. Only half the pack was here; Harry had sent the other twenty, with Lupin, to stay in Grimmauld Place. He'd explained to Draco that he didn't trust Wayhouse's temper, and he didn't trust werewolves to be in Silver-Mirror and around the sun-pool and the wind-pool without falling in—or possibly turning the painting into which they'd tricked the many-legged creature around.

"You should still have slept, Harry." He worked to shear any trace of whining off his tone, and found that he'd succeeded. He sounded quiet, calm, distant, with just a hint of adult condemnation. Like Narcissa, really.

But I still don't want to sound like a parent!

"One night isn't going to kill me," Harry said cheerfully, walking past him. Draco could hear a faint buzz, in addition to smelling the roses. Harry's magic was working to keep him at this level of alertness, it seemed. "Come on, Draco, Camellia's making breakfast."

Draco followed him, eyes narrowed on his partner's back. Harry had promised that he would continue to work on his healing simultaneously with everything else once they were back in the world, and Draco had believed him. But now he wasn't doing it. Draco hated those signs, and before he would see Harry exhaust himself as he had in those days just after the Midsummer battle, he would lock Harry in a room, cast a sleeping spell on him, and then stand outside the room with his wand out so that neither werewolves nor Snape could disturb him.

He's going to miss things, if he wants to think of it purely in terms of the war effort. Tired eyes see less than alert ones do. I suppose I should be grateful that he's making time to eat breakfast, but I'm not. He should be able to take care of himself and still accomplish the majority of what he wants. I know he has the determination to do it. But he's neglecting his sleep just to do a little more. He'd probably whine that that's more useful.

Draco wondered, with a sudden, sharp pang that seemed to center in his stomach, if Harry still derived the majority of his pleasure from being "useful." The way he had talked about the Black fortunes last night, shortly before Draco had gone to bed and assumed that Harry had as well, certainly signaled that.

The value of him is not just in what he can do.

But confronting Harry about that would make him sound still more like a parent, and would probably get him nowhere. Harry knew some really good arguments now, from spending time in the Sanctuary with Seers who could make anything sound reasonable. Besides, Draco suspected that the best way to win him was by rational argument. So

he would watch, collect evidence that refusing to attend to himself was impairing Harry's judgment, and present it to him.

I have the right to push. I told Harry I would. But sometimes you don't learn anything by pushing, and have to wait for the right time. Draco smirked as they entered the kitchen, wondering if Harry assumed the lack of pushing meant that Draco had given up. Ha. Not bloody likely.

"Good morning, Camellia."

Draco glanced up in shock at the cheerful tone in Harry's voice. He hadn't thought he was on that friendly a basis with any of the werewolves last night. But the young woman with ragged dark hair—Draco wrinkled his nose; didn't any of them bathe?—who was flipping something dark brown in a pan turned around with a nod.

"Good morning, Harry," she said. "Breakfast will be ready in a moment, if you'd like to sit down." She nodded again, this time at a table miraculously free of dust. Draco sat down gingerly anyway. The chairs were made of stone, and looked solid, but this had been a Black house. Nasty practical jokes could still be lurking in the furniture.

He watched Camellia cook for a moment. There was a tea-kettle singing nearby, and she reached for it with her free hand, pouring tea into several cups waiting on the counter. Then Harry's magic wafted the cups over to them. It was an impressive feat of dexterity on her part, Draco supposed, but—

"Why aren't you just using your magic to cook?" he asked, as he sipped his tea. It didn't have enough milk, and he muttered that to Harry, who raised an eyebrow and opened the door of a cupboard standing in the far wall. Draco was reassured to note the preservation spell on the crock of milk that came floating out. Of course, Pettigrew and Regulus Black had been living here, so the food wouldn't be that old. "Why do things the Muggle way?" he asked the werewolf.

She caught the thing she was flipping in the pan, and glanced back at him with a small smile. "Because I am a Muggle," she said. "Or, well, I was born that way. The only magic I have is my gift."

Gift—she means lycanthropy. Draco felt faintly sick. He sipped his tea and said nothing. It was one thing to listen to Harry's speeches on irrational prejudices and think smugly that he knew better, that he would never do some of the stupid things the Ministry had done. It was another to sit in a house that had belonged to his ancestors and realize there were Muggles rattling around in it. Or werewolves who thought of their curse as a gift. Draco wondered what his mother would say.

Then he shook his head. She was at the meeting last night. She heard Harry announce his intentions to take them to Cobley-by-the-Sea. If she cared about having Muggles and werewolves running around here, she would have said something.

"Muggle," he went back to Camellia, as she turned around with the pan. Draco thought the food in it looked like a cross between toast and pancakes. At least it smelled good, and she was scraping it onto a plate. "How old were you when you were bitten?"

Camellia gave him a funny stare. "Less than a year old," she said. "My parents were to Scotland on holiday with me and encountered a werewolf. It killed my mother, but my father survived and got us back to London."

Draco choked on his tea. "I—you can't survive that," he said, when he had his breath back. "Children that young can't survive a bite." He noticed Harry watching him with amusement from across the table, but he ignored him. Children that young didn't survive, damn it.

Camellia smirked at him. "I did," she said. "My father didn't know what in the world to do with me, especially when I started changing. Luckily, he had a friend who had a friend who had a friend who knew the London pack, and Loki came and adopted me."

Draco didn't know what to say, so he added milk to his tea and waited for Camellia to finish preparing their breakfast. It was pancakes, he saw when their plates were finally piled. Camellia sat down on the other side of the table and began to talk to Harry about the upcoming interview. Apparently, he was going into the Ministry with werewolves as guards.

And then Draco choked on his pancakes as much as he had choked on his tea.

“Harry,” he said, breaking in. He noticed the irritated look Camellia gave him, but he ignored it. What did he care what a Muggle werewolf thought? “You’re going to take Veritaserum?”

Harry blinked and pushed his glasses up on his nose. “Yes?” he said, making it almost a question. “Skeeter said that she could get me some—or rather, that she has a contact in the Ministry who can procure some. There have been enough lies in the Prophet about me that I thought I should counter them somehow. If I’m under Veritaserum, they’ll have to accept certain things as the truth.”

Draco shook his head tightly. For all his knowledge of history, I don’t think that he imagines how it will look if he takes Veritaserum. “Harry, criminals take Veritaserum. If you drink it, you’ll be showing them that you think of yourself as guilty.”

Harry sighed. “Draco, criminals take it to prove their innocence. Unless it’s forced on them, which the Ministry has rules against, then no one who wants to lie is going to take it.”

“That’s not the point.” Draco could feel agitation roiling in his mind, combining with the political instincts that his father—and his mother, he could acknowledge now—had taken some effort to hammer into him. “You shouldn’t have to take it for them to believe you. Your word ought to be enough, Harry.”

“It ought to be enough,” said Harry with infuriating patience. “But it isn’t. I’ve been gone too long. There’s not been a fresh interview with me to counteract the circling lies. They’ll need the truth straight from my own mouth before they start to believe me.” He took another sip of his tea, as if he believed that should have clinched his point. Camellia sat back with her own tea and looked from one to the other of them as if watching a duel. Draco spared a moment to scowl at her. She offered him a wide, sharp-toothed grin.

Harry turned back to Camellia. His pancakes were still mostly uneaten, Draco saw. "Now, who do you think would be the best second werewolf to come with us? Someone who's a wizard, to balance you? Or someone who looks like a werewolf, to counter the idea that all accepted werewolves will go wild and run through the streets and bite anyone who looks at them sideways?"

"Is going in with werewolves visible wise at all?" Draco interrupted. "I don't think so, not with the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts so important to the Ministry."

"Even they are still operating inside the bounds of law," Harry said. "They had to claim that the werewolves they killed were going to attack them. They're still worried about what the public thinks. That's why this is going to be as public as possible."

Draco made himself sit still for a long moment, while Harry and Camellia spoke and settled on a werewolf named Rose as a good companion. Then he stood. "Harry, can I speak to you?"

Harry turned to him. "Of course—"

"In private."

Harry blinked a bit, but stood. Draco supposed that since he would have granted one of the werewolves the same privilege, he had no qualms about granting it to Draco. "Of course. Excuse us, Camellia," he added over his shoulder. Draco saw the werewolf wave a hand in casual acceptance, but she watched them all the way out of the room.

Draco waited until they were in the room where Harry had sent the owl off again, and then turned to face him. "A privacy ward, if you please," he said. He listened to his own voice. It was cool and strong, and didn't sound anything like a parent's. If anything, he was a political ally of Harry's, and Harry had to listen to him because he would have listened to Lucius or Narcissa in the same position.

"Draco, I'm sure that—"

“Camellia might overhear something,” Draco cut in, keeping his voice polite. “You know what keen ears werewolves have.”

Harry studied his face, directly enough that Draco thought he might have used a touch of Legilimency, and then nodded and raised the privacy ward, a sparkling curve of white light that isolated them just as it had when Harry spoke to Wilmot in the Ministry. Then he leaned back on the wall, folding on the arms, and stared at Draco.

“You don’t need to do this,” Draco said, making sure to keep his voice constrained enough that he didn’t seem as if his temper were going to explode at any moment. “You really don’t, Harry. I applaud the idea of a public interview, and I applaud the idea of doing it through Skeeter, and so suddenly that no one will have any time to set up an ambush. But you don’t need to take Veritaserum, and you don’t need to take werewolves along.”

Harry nodded slowly, as though considering it. “And what would you suggest that I do instead?”

That was more progress than Draco had hoped for. “Trust in your magic,” he urged softly, taking a step closer to his partner. Harry watched him and weighed his words, and that was the best thing he had done today—or since last night, because he had been awake for more than twenty-four hours. Draco stamped down his irritation. “You shocked everyone in the alliance last night, Harry, and a good part of it came from that initial explosion of magic and the clothes you wore.” He noticed that Harry had removed the silver band from his forehead, but still wore the dark green robes. Well, we can find him others for this interview. “You’re a powerful wizard. That means more than you might think it does, to so many people. Didn’t you see the expressions on their faces last night? How they longed to be close to you?” That had been an occasion for more than one moment of smugness from Draco. A few of the younger members of the alliance, in particular Calibrid Opalline, had looked at Harry with more than mere yearning for magic in their eyes.

“Of course I did,” said Harry, sounding faintly surprised. “But mere magic isn’t going to change those opinions circulating in the Daily Prophet, Draco. If it could have, then they wouldn’t have started.”

“You weren’t here,” said Draco. “You said that yourself. And you didn’t have all the webs off your magic then.”

“If I keep using it as a weapon, the shock value won’t last long,” said Harry. “I can’t depend on it forever.”

Draco bit his tongue, deciding that Harry wouldn’t want to hear the old tales of how Lords and Ladies had kept many people panting after their magic for years. He hated being called a Lord, and that was a resistance that had remained, despite everything else he was doing to integrate himself into politics. “That’s true,” said Draco. “But you can go in, composed and calm and saying that you have just as much right as anyone else to be judged fairly—without Veritaserum. Don’t make this into a trial, Harry. It’s going to be hard enough without that.”

Harry smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. “I promise that I’m only using Veritaserum because I think it’s the best choice, Draco.”

“You said that you could depend on me to tell you when you were making the wrong decisions.” Draco stared into his eyes. “And now you are. Listen to me, Harry, please. This could set a precedent, too. What if others want to question you under Veritaserum?”

“I can make the decision,” said Harry, and dropped the privacy ward, and smiled at Draco, and went away to talk to Camellia again.

Draco stood where he was for a moment, pulling his breaths in smoothly through his nose, a relaxation technique his mother had taught him. Then he went to select his own robes. He would look immaculate. He would wield the power of perception that he knew Harry despised.

Someone who will be there should.

Skeeter had chosen to stage the interview in a main corridor of the Ministry—the one that led to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, in fact. There was no way that anyone could miss it. Daily Prophet banners covered the walls, and two photographers hovered ostentatiously in the way. Skeeter herself sat in one of a pair

of chairs, her notebook held firmly in her hands and a smile covering her face. Draco thought the smile looked like a shark's.

Harry had at least changed into different clothes, simple dark robes, for his appearance here. Camellia and Rose walked to either side of him, their nostrils flared as they apparently sniffed for threats. Draco was at Harry's right shoulder. He had his hand on his wand, and he intended to keep it there.

Harry let the control on his magic gradually slip as he neared the chair in front of Skeeter. She turned towards him first, and the shark's smile widened. Draco had heard that being near magic this strong sometimes made wizards and witches dream of what they could accomplish with it. She was one of them, then, which didn't surprise Draco at all.

He took up his position behind Harry's chair as Harry sat down, all poise and confidence. That was good, but Draco could see curious stares from the Ministry workers who had formed an impromptu crowd, their stares growing sharper as they recognized both Skeeter and Harry, and winced. We should have come with a larger entourage. If Harry had just waited and let us inform more people, we could have had my father here at least, and Mrs. Parkinson—no, I don't think Harry would have let her come into the Ministry, when they have spells to track werewolves. Well, Mr. Bulstrode, then. And Owen and Michael should be here.

Harry had had Owen and Michael stay behind at Hogwarts, the excuse being that they were obviously uncomfortable around werewolves and he had to see to the comfort of the pack that night. Draco had thought nothing of it at the time. Now he wondered if it was Harry's training acting against his political instincts again, shoving aside the temptation to show off his sworn companions in public.

This has to stop. I can see that I'll have an even heavier task than I estimated at first.

"Thank you for attending this meeting, vates," said Skeeter, loud enough to be heard over the murmurings of the Ministry workers. "I'd

like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind. Our Prophet readers have been so curious about where you've been this last month!"

Harry smiled. "I'd be happy to tell you," he said. "But first, Mrs. Skeeter, I think there was a condition of this interview we agreed to, and that you're forgetting?"

"Of course, how stupid of me," Skeeter said, with a chuckle, and then fumbled in her purse for what turned out to be a clear vial of Veritaserum. Draco was sourly pleased to see that the smile on her face dimmed a bit. She doesn't think this is a good idea any more than I do.

Harry opened the vial and looked around at the crowd with an open, pleasant face. "I am taking Veritaserum because there have been some questions about my truthfulness, particularly given what I said in the last days before I left," he said. "This will prove that I have nothing to hide." He lifted the vial and touched three drops of the potion to his tongue. The crowd's murmuring increased. Draco listened to the cadences of their words, and decided that they were reluctantly impressed.

He shook his head. This will end badly, I know it. And you do have things to hide, Harry.

Harry swallowed the Veritaserum, and then smiled and looked up at Skeeter. "Whenever you're ready, ma'am," he murmured.

"Thank you, Harry." Skeeter's quill rapped her notebook for a moment, and then she began the questioning. At least Draco could be sure that she'd chosen the questions carefully. "Where did you go this summer? There were so many rumors..."

"To stay with the Seers," said Harry. "They see the present, and souls. They have a Sanctuary I've been invited to visit before, and I finally decided to accept the invitation."

Skeeter tilted her head to the side. "And that's the place that you began your training to defeat You-Know-Who?"

Harry's cover story, to content Whitestag and her group. Draco frowned. I hope the Veritaserum doesn't make him betray that that was a sham.

"I did that, too," said Harry agreeably, and entirely truthfully, Draco realized. Harry could manipulate Veritaserum, at least, as he had done when the Ministry arrested Snape for trying to kill Minister Fudge. It had something to do with being an Occlumens. "I researched various kinds of magic that will be useful in the war. And I worked on myself as hard as I could. When I went to the Sanctuary, I was in no fit state to defend the wizarding world. Now, I hope I can safely say I am."

"Fascinating," said Skeeter, and scribbled rapidly. "Now, can you tell us what that magic is? Or would it be too dangerous to say?"

Good way to work against the Veritaserum, Draco thought, and gave her a slow nod he doubted she noticed. That will let Harry give an answer that's still truthful.

"Too dangerous to say." Harry smiled and waved a hand self-deprecatingly. "And the details would probably be boring to anyone who wasn't studying it," he added. "I've got a bit of the Ravenclaw in me, I'm afraid."

That won a few chuckles. Draco gazed at Harry. If he could only do this as the normal wizard he deserves to be treated as, then what an impression he would make!

"And what would you say to the rumors that started to circulate a few days after your departure?" Skeeter asked, looking up. "About your murdering a dozen children in front of Hogwarts?"

"I mercy-killed them," said Harry, his voice filled with relief, and abruptly, Draco understood why he'd wanted the Veritaserum. This was the only way that might convince the parents of the dead children, and their sympathizers, that he wasn't lying. "Voldemort"—people flinched like dry grass with a wind traveling through it—"had them in a Life-Web. That spell constrains the victims to obey the holder in

whatever way he commands. He can make them die, commit suicide, murder others, become wounded. And he can stop the effects of any spell on them, once he notices it.”

Draco hoped he was the only one to see Harry’s hand clench into a fist on the arm of the chair. His voice stayed steady, though, as if he’d long prepared for the telling of this story. “The Life-Web was to make me give up my own life. I hung there, suspended between the screams of the dying behind me and the screams of the wounded in front of me, and he told me that if I came to him and surrendered, then he would free them.”

Harry gave a dry, bitter chuckle. “Not true, of course. He has lied every time he’s faced me. He had no reason to let them go. And so, because I was pressed for time and I couldn’t think of any better course, I used a heart attack spell on the children. Voldemort was so sure that I’d ultimately have to sacrifice my life—after some pleasurable moments for him, of course—that he didn’t think I’d kill them, and he didn’t notice the spell in time to stop it. They died, and then I was free to go and help the others.”

Skeeter bowed her head in the wake of that statement, and for a moment, silence spread. Draco could see most of the people around them staring with wide eyes. That has to content them, doesn’t it? he thought. They’re thinking about how horrible a choice that is and how they couldn’t make it, that’s plain.

It immediately became obvious that one person there wasn’t, though.

“Do you regret it at all?” someone demanded, and then the same person elbowed several people aside rapidly and moved forward. “Or has it just become a pretty story for you to tell, to try to keep yourself out of justified trouble?”

Draco snarled a bit when he saw the big man, and realized who he must be. Philip Willoughby. And he’s a Muggle, so he’s not feeling Harry’s magic at all, and thus he’s not impressed. Fuck.

“I regret it every day.” Harry’s voice was deep and steady, and, of course, absolutely truthful. “I nearly gave myself up during the siege

because I couldn't live with the guilt. But doing so would have meant condemning others who relied on me. Ultimately, I chose the living over the dead."

Draco winced. And this is why he should not have taken Veritaserum. Damn it all, Harry.

"My daughter is not gone," said Philip. "She is alive in me, still, and she would have wanted me to fight for her. She might have lived if you had gone down to Voldemort and let her live."

"He would not have kept his promise," Harry said.

"You only believe that," said Willoughby, and though his voice was stern Draco saw tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. He wondered what living in the midst of grief for an only child, reminding oneself of it each and every day, would do to a Muggle. He knew they were more mentally fragile than wizards. "You don't know. That Veritaserum can only extract what you believe to be the truth of the matter, not what actually is."

Harry leaned forward, concentrating solely on Willoughby. "Mr. Willoughby, I am sorry for your loss," he said. "But I cannot bring your daughter back. I don't know what to do to make the loss of Alexandra up to you."

"Stand trial," Willoughby snarled back. "You committed a war crime, the torture and murder of a dozen children."

"I did not torture them—" Harry began.

"Allowed them to be tortured, because you did not act sooner!" Willoughby came another step forward, until he was almost level with Skeeter's chair, and Draco heard low growls begin in Camellia's and Rose's throats. "I believe, Mr. Potter, as you don't, obviously, that the person who sees the problem should solve it, if he has the ability to do so. You had the ability. You lacked only the will."

Draco saw Harry flinch, a movement that seemed to start in his bones. Harry, of course, did believe that, and to hear one of his own principles flung in his face had to hurt.

He didn't hear Harry's reply, though, because, unlike his partner, he did not consider Willoughby to be the center of existence and the only one worth paying attention to. He turned his head as a flicker of movement off to the side caught his eye, and saw someone edging forward through the crowd, his hand on something in his pocket.

A wand? Draco gripped his own wand. Draw it, then. He readied himself to throw up a Shield Charm, though he was cautious enough to wait until he saw the spell. As Moody had taught them, some spells could make shields explode, doing more damage to the defenders than the attackers.

He studied the attacker, meanwhile. He was nothing remarkable, just a fairly thin man in the robes of a Ministry flunky. He didn't appear nervous, but rather resigned. His intent gaze on Harry could have been hero-worship, or attempting to memorize his expression to report it back to an employer. Perhaps he was a spy, and not someone who meant to attack after all.

Then his hand whipped out of his pocket, and it wasn't a spell he threw, but something small and round, coin-like, arcing through the air and straight for Harry, over the shoulder of the oblivious werewolf on the left.

Draco made a quick decision. The coin might make a shield explode, for all he knew, but it was likely to do more damage to Harry's skin. "Protego!" he shouted, the spell almost instinctive after practicing it for so long in the dueling club, and the air around him and Harry turned silver and tightened.

Harry twisted around, shouting his own Shield Charm, which linked with Draco's. Draco watched the coin slam into the barrier and then bounce off, rolling back to land halfway between the attacker and the chairs.

The man's eyes widened, and he swallowed, then stumbled backwards.

Harry tightened and raised the barriers a moment before a wave of concussive force sprang out of the coin, heading straight for them. A time-delayed spell, Draco thought, even as he went to his knees and felt his Protego crack. A second shock wave came at him, and he was faced with the choice between maintaining the shield and having the effort hurt him, or letting it go and trying to protect Harry from the new attack he feared was coming.

He dropped it as the third blow struck, trusting in Harry to protect him, and then raised his head. Sure enough, a second wizard had dashed up behind the first one, and was chanting something Draco couldn't hear in the startled shouts and screams. The coin he held shot up into the air, obviously trying to float over the top of the linked Shield Charms.

Draco aimed his wand at the coin. "Conversio!" he shouted.

The coin turned and snapped in the other direction—briefly. Then it slowed again, and Draco could feel the force of the other wizard's magic, pushing against his, trying to direct the coin at him. He gritted his teeth and fought his way to one knee, his mind racing as he tried to think of what spell he could use to strike back, without requiring Harry to drop the Shield Charms.

Harry's magic was crowding the room like a new-grown field of roses, but Draco knew he would think of defense first. He wasn't even sure if Harry had noticed the second coin, and he didn't dare turn his head to check. This stranger was nearly as strong as he was, and the fight took all his concentration. The coin dipped as the stranger's spells varied, and Draco kept re-casting his Conversio. The coin wavered nearer and nearer to them, though.

Draco growled under his breath. The werewolves were shifting around him, but he didn't know if they could get out of the Shield Charms—and if they could, they would probably trigger a panic as soon as they tried to bite someone. No, he had to handle this himself.

He dropped the *Conversio*, as though he'd grown too exhausted to maintain it any longer. The wizard shouted in triumph, and the coin flew at Draco, like a stone from a slingshot.

Draco lifted his wand so that it was pointing straight at the coin through the gap, and snapped, "*Aboleo!*" putting all his conviction into the word. This was a spell that was supposed to stop not only an object but also the magic on it—if the wizard casting it was strong enough.

The coin self-destructed, spinning apart in shards of wood and flame, which made Draco suspect that it had had a time-delayed fire spell on it. Draco saw his opponent's eyes widen, and then narrow. He grabbed the first attacker by the arm and shook his head, and they turned, dodging away down the corridor.

Draco turned and checked that Harry was all right. He was fine, and the last shock wave that came from the coin on the floor was considerably weaker. Harry dropped the *Shield Charms* and gestured at the coin. Since the spell he used was wandless and non-verbal, Draco didn't know what it was, but the coin shivered, and then lost any sense of magic whatsoever.

Draco grabbed Harry's shoulder. "We can still catch them, if we hurry!" he shouted, gesturing with his head in the direction the wizards had gone.

Then he saw there was no need for them to hurry. Camellia had already jumped over the coin and the heads of several of the people in the crowd, landing smoothly on the floor beyond. She took off down the corridor in a hunching run. Draco grinned. He supposed there were some good things about having a werewolf on one's side.

But Camellia hadn't turned the corner before someone shouted, "*Comperio lupum!*" and a blinding blue glow formed around her body. She whimpered and slid to a stop, putting a hand up to shield her face. Two witches in what looked vaguely like Auror robes shoved forward through the crowd, heading for her.

“She’s a werewolf,” said the taller one. Draco saw that she had a badge on her robes that depicted a severed wolf’s head. “It’s illegal for her to be in the Ministry, and without either a collar or a keeper with her. We’re going to—”

“You’re not going to harm her.”

Draco started as ice slid along the walls next to him. He turned, and Harry was stepping towards the witches, who must be from the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts, his eyes wide and his hand out. His magic had sharpened into a low, concentrated glow around him, more full of darkness and flames than actual light. Draco gave a faint, sharp smile. If he had gone in like this in the first place, then I don’t think anyone would have tried to attack him. Maybe next time he’ll listen to me. It’s better to intimidate your enemies than make them think you’re conciliatory.

“Even you can’t disobey the law,” the shorter witch said, in a soothing tone. “We know who you are, vates, but she was running wild, and obviously going to hurt two innocent wizards—”

“Who just tried to kill me,” said Harry.

There was a sudden and awkward silence. Draco looked around the crowd. Most of them were watching cautiously; events had happened too fast for them to catch up. The witches from the Department had paled a bit. Harry had his head up and tilted slightly, and Draco didn’t think it was a coincidence that his hair had shifted enough to let everyone see his lightning bolt scar.

“Unless, of course, that make them innocent by definition,” Harry continued, his voice deep and poisonously polite. “Unless the vates is exempt from protection, and anyone who tries to kill him is a hero.”

“No one means that.” The shorter witch put out a hand, then winced and snatched it back. Draco didn’t blame her. The air in Harry’s immediate vicinity had chilled so much that it hurt to stand near him. “But—well, she might have bitten them.”

“And that would have done nothing, this far from the full moon,” said Harry. “She was trying to protect me. She is sworn to me.” He pivoted back to face Skeeter. “I would have been able to tell you about the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, if we had not been interrupted,” he said. “This is an alliance that anyone can join, if they will come to me and promise to swear its oath and obey its principles. We welcome anyone who wishes to join—Muggleborn, Squib, centaur, merfolk, pureblood, Dark wizard, Light wizard, werewolf.” He nodded at Camellia, who had crept back towards him, and Rose, who was showing her teeth as if she couldn’t stop herself. “And we require our members to think past their fear, rather than stop someone going in pursuit of would-be assassins.” He gave the Department witches a heated glance. “You will, of course, help me hunt for those men, since you stopped Camellia from finding them.”

The witches dipped their heads, but Draco could see the fear and growing dislike in their eyes. They didn’t like being ordered around, even though they didn’t dare oppose Harry.

“You may also tell your readers,” Harry went on, turning back to Skeeter, “that Loki, the werewolf leader who was sending threatening letters to Wizengamot Elders and attacking them, has now given his pack into my protection. These are two members of it, Camellia and Rose.” He gestured to the two werewolves. He seemed oblivious to how many people promptly inched away, but Draco guessed he had, in truth, noticed. “They will not be attacking anyone any more. Loki has gone rogue, and may, but his pack has sworn peace with anyone who swears peace with them. They will defend me, however, as I will defend them.”

Skeeter wrote quickly, then stood. Draco could almost see her bouncing up and down, no doubt in a frenzy to get back and report this to the Daily Prophet before some other newspaper could bring the story out. “Thank you, vates, you’ve been most informative,” she babbled, and then dashed out.

Harry snorted and turned back to face the Department witches. “Aren’t you going to help me hunt?” he demanded.

They stirred and led the way reluctantly down the hall. Draco shook his head. "I don't think we're going to find them," he muttered to Harry.

"I know," said Harry, with a long-suffering sigh. "They'll be gone by now. But we have one possible clue." He held out his hand, and Draco saw the first wooden coin there. It was stamped with the image of a winged horse, body arched as though in flight. "If we can figure out what this means, we'll have a good start on figuring out who they are."

Draco nodded, reassured. The flying horse could mean a number of things, but not anything.

"What bothers me more," Harry continued, "is how they knew."

Draco had to think about that, but then he felt something ugly twist in his chest. "Skeeter set this up so quickly," he said. "So how did they, whoever they are, manage to coordinate an assassination attempt, or a warning—" he wasn't sure the assassins had seriously thought they could take a wizard of Harry's power "—so quickly?"

"Exactly," said Harry. "Someone told them. But who?"

Draco paused. He didn't want to say what he was thinking, but he had to. "The werewolves knew," he observed at last.

"I know." It was obvious what an effort it cost Harry to say those words, Veritaserum or not. He sighed. "Believe me, Draco, I'm aware of that. And some of the things you said made me think that you were right and I was wrong about how to handle this interview. It didn't go the way I hoped. I'll have to listen to you more closely next time."

A warm glow grew in Draco's chest to replace the ugly thing. He touched Harry's hand. "I'm glad that you're still here to listen to me next time," he whispered.

Harry smiled at him, and then of course the Muggle had to cut in and ruin everything.

“Mr. Potter. I have not finished talking to you.” Willoughby was folding his arms across his chest and scowling at Harry.

Harry gave him the same kind of disinterested glance he'd given Snape. “Mr. Willoughby, you can always write me if you'd like to continue this conversation. Right now, I've just had my life threatened, and the freedom of one of my people equally threatened. I hope you understand why I'm not in the mood for debate. I mercy-killed your daughter. That's the end of it.”

He turned away, and Draco bit his lip to keep from cheering at the expression on the Muggle's face before he hurried after Harry.

I think he must have learned after all. It takes a while to get him to think about himself, but not as long as it once would have. This is wonderful. For one thing, I can push and get better results than if he were utterly resistant to it, or just ignoring me.

Interlude: The Daily Prophet, August 5th, 1996

The Daily Prophet August 5th, 1996

INTERVIEW OF THE DAY:

HARRY VATES: LEADER OF THE ALLIANCE OF SUN AND SHADOW

By: Rita Skeeter

In a startling development, Harry, the vates by his own choice, the Boy-Who-Lived by virtue of his having toppled You-Know-Who from power in the First War, the legal heir of the Black line by the choice of Regulus Black, and the Young Hero by popular acclaim, has not only returned to the wizarding world, but granted this reporter an exclusive interview today, in which he revealed his future plans for the war against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

We met in the corridor of the Ministry of Magic which leads to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement—rather a fitting place, given the aura of justice that surrounded Harry as he strode to take his seat. He has just turned sixteen; his birthday is the thirty-first of July. But he wears the expression of a wizard much more mature than his years, as well as stronger and more confident.

Even more surprisingly, he chose to conduct this interview entirely under Veritaserum. He wished the wizarding world to know that what he said today was the absolute truth, he explained.

I thanked him for his courtesy in allowing me to interview him, and led off with a question emphasizing the curiosity of our readers as to his whereabouts for the last month. He wore a faint smile when he regarded me, and answered—truthfully, of course.

He said that he had been at a Sanctuary of Seers who can see the present and souls. Rather a frightening place to this reporter, but he spoke as if he went there daily. In Harry's words, he "finally decided to accept the invitation."

Since the last story of the Young Hero's whereabouts involved him going to train and learn how to defeat You-Know-Who, I asked him about that. Harry's response was frank and cordial.

"I researched various kinds of magic that will be useful in the war. And I worked on myself as hard as I could. When I went to the Sanctuary, I was in no fit state to defend the wizarding world. Now, I hope I can safely say I am."

Given that the vates has already flown against dragons and stopped them from attacking students in the school, freed South African hive cobras and centaurs from their wrongfully imposed webs, helped in the deposing of former Minister Cornelius Fudge, lost his left hand in You-Know-Who's return, battled the wild Dark at Midwinter last year—at the cost of his own bonded phoenix—freed Durmstrang from the mad hold of Bellatrix Lestrange, held a vernal equinox alliance meeting for anyone interested in seeing and assessing him, lured You-Know-Who into a trap that wound up cutting a hole in his magical core, and planned and led the Battle of Hogwarts, this reporter had to wonder what state he thought would be a fit one in which to defend the wizarding world.

"Now, can you tell us what that magic is?" I asked, even mindful of the informed curiosity of Prophet readers. "Or would it be too dangerous to say?"

Harry demurred on that one, indicating that the danger factor was indeed high. Besides, he added, "And the details would probably be boring to anyone who wasn't studying it. I've got a bit of the Ravenclaw in me, I'm afraid."

It is this reporter's opinion that he has more than a bit of every House in him, if his genius for battle, his loyalty to his allies, and his courage under curses are all observed. And, of course, there is the fact that he has the Malfoy magical heir, son of a very old Slytherin pureblood family and his joined partner-to-be, constantly at his side. Young Draco stood behind his chair, and observed me in ways that I don't mind saying sent shivers up his spine. Merciless grace is in him already, if I may be permitted to quote my own description of Lucius Malfoy from more than a decade ago.

Of course, inevitably, less pleasant matters came up. I had to ask him about the rumors of his murdering a dozen children in the Battle of Hogwarts. Harry's answer was flavored with both Veritaserum and his own bitter regret.

"I mercy-killed them," he said, in a voice with the strain and the grief obvious. "You-Know-Who he of course used his name, but this reporter understands the true sensitivities of Prophet readers had them in a Life-Web. That spell constrains the victims to obey the holder in whatever way he commands. He can make them die, commit suicide, murder others, become wounded. And he can stop the effects of any spell on them, once he notices it."

Independent research on the Life-Web done by this reporter corroborates Harry's words. In fact, the Life-Web can also be used to drive its victims insane. It gives its caster absolute control over the victims' lives and minds. And it cannot be broken by anyone but the caster.

Harry continued with his harrowing account of what it was like during the moments when You-Know-Who held the battle—not the Battle of Hogwarts, but the assault made thirteen days previous, on the eighth of June—in suspense. "The Life-Web was to make me give up my own life. I hung there, suspended between the screams of the dying behind me and the screams of the wounded in front of me, and he told me that if I came to him and surrendered, then he would free them."

He chuckled then, but it was obvious to this reporter that he found no humor in the statements. "Not true, of course. He has lied every time he's faced me. He had no reason to let them go. And so, because I was pressed for time and I couldn't think of any better course, I used a heart attack spell on the children. You-Know-Who was so sure that I'd ultimately have to sacrifice my life—after some pleasurable moments for him, of course—that he didn't think I'd kill them, and he didn't notice the spell in time to stop it. They died, and then I was free to go and help the others."

That is the truth that every Prophet reader has been wanting to know for the last month: harsh, bare, unadorned.

Of course, a grieving parent could not be expected to accept this, and one of them did not. Philip Willoughby, 34, the Muggle father of the first-year Ravenclaw Alexandra Willoughby, one of Harry's victims, appeared then, and accused Harry of telling a "pretty story."

Harry admitted to suffering guilt, no matter how necessary his decision may have been. "I regret it every day," he told Mr. Willoughby. He even talked about being willing to commit suicide during the siege. He concluded that, "Ultimately, I chose the living over the dead."

Mr. Willoughby, understandably, was less than impressed with this, and a brief argument followed, with both debaters staunchly defending their own positions. Then there came an attempt on Harry's life. Wooden coins with time-delayed spells on them were flung at both Harry, the two women who had come with him, and his partner Draco Malfoy by attackers unknown.

Harry raised a Shield Charm to link with his partner's coolly and confidently. It's obvious that he's weathered assassination attempts like this before. With the coins destroyed, the attackers fled. One of Harry's allies moved to go after the threat to her mates, springing over the heads of those present with more-than-mortal grace and speed. As it turned out, she is a werewolf, but perfectly obedient to Harry, part of the newly-organized Alliance of Sun and Shadow.

Two members of the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts, however, cast a werewolf-finding spell on Harry's ally and attempted to take her into custody. This prevented her from finding and dragging back the attackers. It is possible that the Department witches feared for the lives of the attackers, but this reporter wonders why they did not seem to fear for the innocent lives that the attackers could have cost when they launched their offensive.

Harry coldly forbade them to take his ally into custody. As she had bitten no one, and it is not near the full moon, he maintained, there was no danger from her.

And it was then that he revealed his new alliance, which, for the first time, has a formal oath and a name, and has granted him another title.

“This is an alliance that anyone can join, if they will come to me and promise to swear its oath and obey its principles. We welcome anyone who wishes to join—Muggleborn, Squib, centaur, merfolk, pureblood, Dark wizard, Light wizard, werewolf” With these words, he nodded to both his companions, making it obvious that both of them were werewolves, and had behaved themselves perfectly until the assassination attempt. “And we require our members to think past their fear, rather than stop someone going in pursuit of would-be assassins.” A bit of a slap at the Department, there, but his anger was up and surging, his magic filling the corridor, and of course our Boy-Who-Lived has always been a bit angry when someone attacks his allies.

“You may also tell your readers,” he continued, “that Loki, the werewolf leader who was sending threatening letters to Wizengamot Elders and attacking them, has now given his pack into my protection. These are two members of it, Camellia and Rose. They will not be attacking anyone any more. Loki has gone rogue, and may, but his pack has sworn peace with anyone who swears peace with them. They will defend me, however, as I will defend them.”

He turned and left then, seeming oblivious to how changed the world is in his wake. But then, another defining trait of the Young Hero so far has been his modesty.

Harry vates has returned to the wizarding world with a vengeance, but his mission is guided by a sense of justice, an alliance devoted to inclusion, and principles that seem to rely on rising above fear. I trust that all Prophet readers are looking forward to what will happen now as much as I am, and are as thankful to have such a brave, determined young man dedicated to protecting us from You-Know-Who.

Chapter Nine: Three Arguments, Two Discussions, and One Early Morning

“Good—” Draco paused when he stepped around the corner into Regulus’s study and saw Harry sitting at a desk covered with paper. Harry glanced at him from the corner of his eye and saw him standing there, staring rather obviously. Harry wondered why for a moment, but Draco said nothing, and he could be overcome by the oddest things at the oddest times.

At the moment, he was more interested in looking through the Blacks’ collection of law books. Though they’d been assembled for a horrible purpose—some of Regulus’s ancestors had wanted to bring back Muggle-hunting, and had looked into Ministry laws to find a loophole that would let them justify it—they were impressively comprehensive. If Harry could find legal means to fight the Ministry’s anti-werewolf laws, he would find them here.

“What are you doing?”

And Draco’s voice had that odd edge again. Harry sat back and smiled at him. Draco didn’t seem inclined to leave him alone until he did. “Looking for loopholes that will prove the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts is illegal,” he explained.

“Really.”

Harry frowned and cocked his head. Draco’s voice had gone cool, and lost all traces of curiosity. But if he doesn’t want to know what I’m doing, why did he ask?

“Yes,” Harry said. “It turned out that Fudge did stupid things out of fear. He passed laws right under Dumbledore’s nose, for instance. Other than his kidnapping of me, that’s the kind of thing that got him subjected to a vote of no confidence. I think it’s at least possible that Amelia Bones made the same kind of mistakes when she organized this Department. I want to expose them.” He shut the book in front of him and dragged the next one towards him. Ministry Edicts Relating to Other Species, 1600-1785: A—Ad. It at least looked promising, Harry thought.

“Hmmm.” Draco continued to stand there, even though Harry had thought he would leave when he realized Harry’s subject matter was so boring. “And what were you going to do if you found this information?”

“Start compiling it, of course,” said Harry, digging through the tome. Hermione had had a nice little spell last year that would mark every occurrence of a certain word in a book; she’d used it when revising for OWL’s. Harry regretted now that he’d never asked her to teach it to him, and that he didn’t know whether she’d found it in the library or modified an existing spell. He resolved to write her and ask her to teach it to him. “And then start contacting people in the Ministry who could help me—lean on a few people, and ask the proper questions. I don’t want a legal battle if I can avoid one. Making the Wizengamot reconsider their actions will serve just fine.”

“When were you planning to go to bed?”

“Hmmm,” it was Harry’s turn to say, as he halted on a page covered with a description of a law relating to vampire restrictions. It had something to do with collars. It would take him a while to untangle the complicated legal language, but perhaps he could use it as a precedent when talking about werewolves and these collars the Department evidently wanted them to wear. “Soon.”

Draco drew his wand and whispered a spell under his breath. Harry ignored him, knowing Draco wouldn’t do anything to hurt him.

He had to pay attention when all the books on the desk, including the one he was reading, lifted in the air and then came back down on the surface with a colossal thump, though. Harry turned around, his mouth already open to utter an angry shout.

“I am sick and tired of this, Harry,” said Draco, in a voice that could cut glass, stepping forward. “You are slipping again. You are ignoring your promises again. You made a stupid decision by not going to bed last night, and you’re about to make it again. I won’t let you.”

“My magic can keep me alert,” Harry argued, pushing his fringe out of his eyes. He knew what weariness felt like. This wasn’t weariness. His magic, now that it was free, obeyed him much more thoroughly than it ever had before, and that included eating the poisons that Harry knew could build up in his body after skipping too much sleep. “I’m fine. I don’t need to—“

“If you say you don’t need to sleep I am going to smack you,” said Draco, in such a conversational tone that Harry only realized what he’d said a moment later. He blinked and opened his mouth to retort, and once again Draco got there first. “Your magic can’t keep you alert enough. Shall I tell you what failures of alertness I’ve observed in you today?”

“You might as well,” Harry said, leaning back with a scowl and folding his arms over his chest. “Since you’re about to do it anyway.”

Draco’s lip curled and his eyes glittered, but his tone was once more cuttngly polite. “You didn’t notice the attackers edging around to the side during your meeting with Skeeter. You especially didn’t notice the second one. I saw the look of surprise on your face when I told you about him.”

“I was focusing on Willoughby,” Harry said.

“You don’t normally focus on anyone that much,” Draco said. “You’ve saved your own life before because you saw something out of the corner of your eye. And not noticing the second coin, once the attack had already begun and you should have been paying attention to everything around you? That was pure carelessness, Harry.”

Harry lowered his eyes, feeling an unhappy squirming sensation in his stomach. “I was lucky you were there,” he said quietly. “I already admitted that you were right, Draco. What more do you want from me?”

“Not this,” Draco said, and he sounded angry now. “Nothing like this. I don’t like being your keeper, Harry. I’m supposed to be your partner, your equal. And when I see you not even noticing that Camellia tried to talk to you earlier, and nearly dropping the sugar bowl because you

forgot about it before it reached the table, and snapping at Rose for an innocent joke—“

“It was at your expense, Draco!” Harry exclaimed. Rose had made a remark about how one could solve all the wizarding world’s problems by making it legal to hunt snotty little purebloods, since they were the one prey everyone else could agree on.

“I could have handled it myself, you twit,” Draco said. “You’re losing control of your emotions, which always happens when you haven’t had enough sleep. And what happens if you do that with your magic free of all its restraints now? What kind of accidents is it going to cause?”

Harry felt as if someone had jammed a shard of glass into his stomach. He tried to speak, swallowed, and then shook his head.

Draco folded his arms and tapped the fingers of his left hand against his elbow. Harry blinked as he seemed to see a faint aura of white light surrounding the fingers. He touched his forehead.

Am I coming down with something? Seeing some magic that Draco’s about to perform? He had seen that happen in the Sanctuary, shadows of wizards anticipating what spell their enemy was going to cast next by a glimpse of light around their hands.

Then he sighed as he realized what it probably was. Lack of sleep. Draco’s right. The magic can only do so much to help me stay awake. I’m going to start seeing little things like that.

“Do you understand me now?” Draco asked, his voice softer than before. “I don’t like fighting with you, Harry. But I hate scolding you even more. You’re supposed to be better than this. You’re not allowed to neglect your health and yourself for anyone else any more. You promised me that. We agreed.”

I’ve got to live simultaneously. Harry cast a longing glance at the Black legal books, but, in the end, he had to nod.

“Good,” said Draco, relief entering his voice. “Because I really do hate this, you know. Yelling at you isn’t pleasant, and knowing that if I don’t do it, no one else will, is even less pleasant. I can’t wait until you and Snape reconcile again, so that someone else can handle that part of it. He likes shouting at you.” He unfolded his arms and held out his hand to Harry. “So. Ready to go to bed?”

“I suppose so,” Harry said. “But it’s only nine.” He knew he was whining, but he couldn’t help it.

Draco stared at him, then waved his wand and whispered, “Tempus.” The time that appeared was clearly past midnight. He looked at Harry with one eyebrow raised.

Harry frowned and performed his own Tempus. The time that appeared was five minutes after nine. Then it wavered and showed the same as Draco’s numbers. Then it wavered back and settled on ten something. The second pair of numbers was too blurred for Harry to make out.

“Your magic’s gone wonky, you arse,” said Draco, voice deep with affection. “Not a surprise, when you’ve been awake for almost forty hours. Come on.” He tugged, and Harry let him lead him to his bedroom, or the room he’d planned on using for a bedroom. The sheets on the bed hadn’t been disturbed, so far, though Draco cleaned them with a dusting charm now.

“I can get into my pyjamas on my own,” Harry said with great dignity, while he struggled to open his trunk. His magic seemed to be leaving him now, as if it could sense that he was about to sleep and didn’t need it to support him any longer. He yawned, hard enough to hurt his jaw, and his hand fumbled at the trunk’s lid and missed.

“Alohomora,” Draco intoned, and the trunk lid flipped up. “That would be because I slept last night,” he added.

“Shutup,” Harry muttered, and tugged out his pyjamas. “But I can get into them on my own, so you can go to bed now,” he added.

“Nonsense,” said Draco amicably. “We don’t want you falling and cracking your head open on the floor, do we?”

There was some more arguing, all of which completely failed to make any impact on Draco, and somehow Harry found himself helped out of his robes, his shirt, and his trousers, and into his pyjamas. He couldn’t be sure that Draco didn’t stare at him fixedly, at some point or another, but he was too tired to notice if it really happened. He crawled into bed, and the sheets falling on top of him were among the best things he’d ever felt.

Draco tugged his glasses off, and Harry shut his eyes. He had an unexpected moment of clarity in the midst of all the drowsiness.

He’s right. What happened today should never have happened. And especially not if it affects my magic. I’m depending on that to protect my allies and make the difference in my alliance’s success. What happened today can’t be repeated.

And if that means waiting a few nights to do legal research, or not getting everything I want to done immediately, then I suppose that’s what has to be done. I’m good at accepting the limitations of other people’s wills. I can accept the limitations of my own body, surely.

He sighed, and then he was asleep.

He woke surrounded in warmth. Harry opened his eyes and scowled at the ceiling. He was lying on his back, and he knew from the heat against his side that Draco lay next to him, arms tangled with his, uttering the short little snores that he would deny he gave.

He didn’t go back to his own bed. He stayed with me. Prat.

He stirred, and that was enough to wake Draco up. Draco opened one eye and regarded him from beneath a strand of blond hair that sweat had plastered to his nose. “Going somewhere?” he asked.

“To the loo,” Harry pointed out. “I didn’t even brush my teeth last night.” His mouth felt all fuzzy, in confirmation of that.

Draco cocked his head, and the strand slid away from his nose, falling back to join the rest of his hair. "You're irritated at me again," he said. "For making you go to bed? Because I'm not going to apologize for that, Harry. If anything, you should be apologizing for making it necessary." He looked haughty.

"Not that," said Harry. "It's just—you didn't have to stay here and sleep with me, you know."

Draco chuckled.

Harry frowned. That wasn't the reaction he would have expected. "What?" he asked.

Draco sat up and stretched. Harry's eyes widened. He could see part of the reason he had been so warm now, sheets and his pyjamas and Draco's closeness aside. Draco was naked from the waist up.

And it was—it was distracting. Harry could feel his cheeks growing even warmer from the rush of blood. He looked away. Draco laughed again, and then he moved around in front of Harry, kneeling on the blankets and deliberately showing himself off. He was pale, but not as pale as Harry would have expected. He'd stayed long enough in the sun at the Sanctuary to tan a little, it seemed. And not all of his hair was glued to his skin by sweat, some of it stood out and away from his skin, and his chest rose and fell lightly with his breathing—

Stop it. Harry shook his head. He had very important things to do and think about, things that—

Draco reached out and put his hands on Harry's shoulders. Harry could feel the touch even through the layer of cloth that separated them. Of course, the layer of cloth wasn't all that thick.

"I believed you when you told me that you intended to keep living in the midst of all this war and revolution," Draco murmured into his ear. "I still believe you. That means I think you've healed enough to push, Harry. And when I push, I do ask for things that I want. No, I know I didn't need to stay here. I wanted to. And I'll be asking for a little more from now on. Your allies are important, the werewolves are important,

Snape's important, all the people you want to save are important. But so am I." He dipped his head and caught Harry's lips in a kiss.

That in itself wasn't unusual. The speed with which he managed to deepen the kiss was, and so was the way he pushed Harry back to lie against the pillows. Harry could hear his own breathing for a moment, erratic and loud, and then the thudding of blood in his ears entirely took over from that.

He wasn't panicking, not exactly, perhaps because Draco had taken him so entirely by surprise. He was feeling as if he wanted to touch Draco, and feeling, now, the lack of a left hand so that he could do so easily on that side, and feeling the sharp spike of pleasure that he'd learned to associate with kissing Draco when he wasn't relaxed, and feeling embarrassment that he'd succumbed to this so easily, and feeling—

"You always think too much," Draco pointed out, drawing back from the kiss, and ghosted his fingers over the side of Harry's neck.

Harry scowled at him again, as best as he could when he kept squirming. "Don't you dare," he said.

Draco smiled innocently at him, and then his fingers gave a hard stroke, not exactly a pinch, at that spot Harry often cursed him for finding. Bloody hell, did it have to feel so good?

And once again, what hit him wasn't exactly panic. Every time he started to panic, another emotion surged up and drowned that one. Right now, embarrassment was strongest. He was moaning, and wasn't that undignified, and shouldn't he be going out and saving the world instead of lying here tangled with Draco?

"Still thinking too much," Draco told him, and leaned over as if he would go after that spot with his tongue and teeth.

Indignant, Harry took revenge. Draco's ears were sensitive, he knew that, and one of them was passing right near his mouth now. He blew into it, and Draco started, pausing long enough for Harry to pull himself up on the pillows and latch his mouth onto the lobe.

Ha! he thought triumphantly as Draco began to squirm and moan in turn. Let's see who's turning who on now!

He pushed, aided by his Levitation Charm, and Draco draped half-on, half-off his chest, allowing him to sit up. Harry managed to keep licking and biting at Draco's ear, and now Draco was squealing, which Harry was sure he'd never done.

And now it was recklessness drowning him, the same kind of recklessness he felt when he was chasing the Snitch in and out between the stands, seeing it flickering and diving just ahead of him, knowing it would smack home into his palm in the next moment, knowing that the way he knew that sliding his hand down Draco's chest and pressing firmly on his groin was the right thing to do.

Draco made a sound that had no name and thrust wildly against his palm. Harry laughed, letting go of his ear to do it.

Then he made himself leap from the bed, say brightly, "That was a wonderful beginning to the morning, thank you," and walk to the loo. It was an uncomfortable walk, but not long, and he made do. Then he shut the door behind him, put up a ward that Draco couldn't undo, and turned on the shower. There was still no panic, because this time determination was gripping him.

If he gets to push, so do I.

"Well," said Camellia, flinging her hair over her shoulder and frowning at Harry, "it seems to me that what you really need is most of your allies in one place."

"That would make sense, yes," said Harry, cradling his cup of tea against his cheek. He heard Draco enter the kitchen with a few sharp steps. Merrily, he ignored him, smiling at Camellia. "But I could just call another alliance meeting if that was really all I wanted. And there are people I left out last time, because they're not a formal part of the alliance, whom I'd like to see now. My brother, for example. And I'd like to contact other werewolf packs in London. Would they come, do you think?"

“Not to a formal alliance meeting,” said Camellia. “Loki’s—solitary path was a shock for all of us, and so was his decision to make you our alpha. They’re not quite ready to accept you as a leader, I think. And the alphas might be wary that you’re trying to take their places.”

Harry nodded. Draco sat down with a thump. “Good morning,” Harry told him, without turning to look at him.

Draco muttered something about it being a good morning if Harry thought it was, of course, and something else that seemed to include the word “wanker.” Harry pretended not to hear. “So we need a less formal atmosphere,” he told Camellia. “Something that will encourage people to come and relax—and perhaps see that we’re slowly getting used to each other, after Loki’s unexpected little gesture.”

Camellia nodded. “That would be a good idea, yes. Unfortunately, I don’t know how—“

“A festival.”

Harry glanced at Draco. “Pardon?”

“A festival,” Draco said, slathering marmalade over his toast as if the toast were about to run away. “A festival to celebrate your turning sixteen. A lot of the purebloods have them, you know, even when they’re not magical heirs.” Harry snorted at the thought of putting together a party that included Voldemort, and Draco gave him a faint half-smile that eased the lines of frustration lingering around his mouth. “It would give us an excuse to have a party, and to invite anyone you like. The festivals are traditionally supposed to be as big as possible, you know, to accommodate everyone seeing the almost-adult heir in all his glory.”

“I’m not a pureblood,” Harry muttered, scowling as he remembered Draco’s own confirmation festival and how out of place he’d felt there.

“That’s our excuse for inviting anyone you like,” Draco told him, sucking marmalade off the heel of his hand in a manner that made

Harry have to look away, “instead of having to send the invitations to a select number of pureblood families.”

Harry hesitated. He had to admit the idea had merit. The formal alliance meetings always lent themselves to an air of solemnity, whether it was on the vernal equinox or at night in the middle of the Forbidden Forest, and he hadn't had the chance to say everything he wanted the other night, caught off-balance as he was by Loki's sudden gesture. This would be more of a boundary-crossing.

“Plus,” Draco said, again seeming to read his mind, as he had about Voldemort, “it gives you a chance to show off.”

Harry scowled at him. “The way that you wanted me to show off yesterday?”

“Yes,” said Draco, unabashed. “The way that might have intimidated your enemies out of trying to hurt you.”

Harry sighed and stood up. Draco stood to follow him, but Harry shook his head. “Give me a moment to think in private, please.”

“Of course,” Draco said, voice softer than Harry had heard it in some time, and sat down. Camellia gave him a keen glance, as much to say that werewolves would probably be following along whether Harry wanted them to or not, and then settled back in her own chair and turned to talk to Draco. Draco answered her with an edge to his tone. Harry knew he still wasn't entirely comfortable around werewolves. And why should he be? He'd been raised to consider them despicable halfbreeds at best, and dangerous beasts most of the time.

Harry paced into the middle of Regulus's study. The pile of legal books he'd left there last night caught his eye, but he shook his head and turned his back on them, shutting and warding the door so that no one could come in and ask him what was wrong. He bowed his head and let his chin rest on his chest.

Here was one of those decisions he had known he would have to make eventually, but which he had dreaded making. There were arguments waiting on both sides of the path. If he passed this point,

he was passing a crossroads, and he wouldn't find it easy to reverse himself and make a different decision the next time it came up.

He didn't want to intimidate people. He had never wanted to. And if he went around using his magic and his political power and his money to get his own way, then he was acting against one of the principles he'd sworn to in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. He was making people fear instead of think. He thought of the way Amelia Bones had cowered in her office, and winced. He didn't want people to be afraid of him. He actually preferred Willoughby's attitude to that, or the way that the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts had reacted at first. They might dismiss him or sneer at him, but at least they weren't shaking in their boots at the mere thought of him.

But he knew Draco was right. If he showed exactly what he was capable of, then it might keep assassins from tackling him; they'd be too wary. And that would, in turn, spare the lives of those around him, who were not about to back away now. And he could guard the werewolves better if he showed that he was not to be fucked with. Obstacles would melt away in front of him easily.

Too easily.

A few years ago, the decision would have been easy—lives were more important than his own personal preferences—but he'd sacrificed lives for lives since then, and known what it was like for the wild Dark to make him try to abandon his principles for the sake of sparing lives, and now it wasn't easy.

I suppose I should thank my mother again, for training me to make everything so difficult, he thought wryly, and wiped his hand across his eyes.

In the end, he made his decision, because he had to. In at least one important way, this festival was like the alliance meeting. No one could be forced to attend. Motives as diverse as curiosity and greed would guide them in. Harry would make it clear who and what he was at that festival. That was not the same thing as pouring his power over the rooftops and demanding that everyone bow to him.

And, sooner or later, didn't he have to start respecting the decisions of other people in the alliance to agree to its principles? He could not smother his magic and avoid their fear forever. Some people would always fear him no matter how gently he held himself, and others would be fearless in the face of any provocation. He had to assume that his allies had some courage.

As usual, the moment he chose a course, ideas for making the best of that course flooded in. Harry stood up and strode with a determined step to the door. He'd hold the festival five days from today, or a bit longer if it took him longer to send out invitations, gather food, and arrange other matters.

And he wouldn't be idle in the remaining time, either. There were three things in particular he would like to do today.
"Professor Snape, sir."

Snape turned with a snap. He had lost himself in a haze of brewing, the last day. Dragonfire burns needed constant care, which was a good thing. It kept him from thinking.

Harry's life had been threatened, and he was not there.

Harry had confronted werewolves, and he was not there.

Harry had werewolves living with him, and he was not there. He was put down like a useless trunk, once used to carry its master's most prized possessions, now tucked away in a closet until the next time it was needed.

He was aware that the comparison was unfair even as he made it. That only made him hate matters more.

And now Harry stood in the door of his lab, his head cocked to one side as though he were trying to decide whether the best course was to come inside or invite Snape out.

"Say what you came to say and be done with it," Snape told him. He was proud to hear his voice sound almost like its normal self. It helped that last night's dream had only contained a mild torture scenario, nothing too overwhelming.

Harry nodded. "Very well, sir. I'd like you to stay in Cobley-by-the-Sea with me for the rest of the summer. I don't know if you can control yourself, though. There are werewolves there, half of Loki's pack. And in five days, I'm having a festival that will include more of them, perhaps as many as a hundred. So I'll understand if you don't want to come because of that."

Snape stared at him. Harry went on standing there, quietly, his eyes expectant, as if he hadn't asked the impossible.

"You want me there," Snape said at last.

Harry nodded again.

"Why?"

Harry blinked. "Because, sir," he said, as if it were self-evident, "I missed you."

Snape had to turn away and put down the vial he was holding. It clinked too hard, and a fine crack appeared in the glass. Snape busied himself repairing it, all the while feeling his skin crawl on the back of his neck.

Vulnerable, vulnerable, too fucking vulnerable, and the only thing he could find to be grateful for was that it was Harry standing there, not Harry and someone else.

"And Draco told me a bit about the festival," Harry went on. "I'll be adapting the tradition, not following it precisely, but it's still usual to have a parent there. You're my father in all but blood, sir."

Snape's free hand closed into a fist. That only filled him all the more with a sense of stinging shame, that he'd said to Joseph the other day that Harry was not his son, and how could he think so? He had

been thinking of family by birth and blood. Since he'd dreamed so much of his mother and the days when his mother's word ruled his life, that was understandable. But now Harry was here, and Snape had to remember, as if he were capable of forgetting for long, that Harry did not care all that much about birth and blood.

The shame only coiled and turned into anger, though, the self-satisfied, self-sustaining bitterness that had fed him for so long. He offered a hard shoulder to the world, and it stung him, and so he stung it in turn, and that resulted in more stinging. It was the way he lived.

"And if I do not want to come?" he asked at last, the rasp in his voice audible.

Harry paused. When his next words came staggering out, Snape knew the pause had been one of shock, not of planning. "Then I'll—accept that, sir."

He's hurt. Snape gained the courage to look up and see the way that Harry's eyes had widened. He stood perfectly motionless, in the manner of someone trying to hide a wound before an enemy.

Oddly—or perhaps not so oddly, given that he was, now, not the only vulnerable one in the room—that struck through to Snape as nothing had in weeks. He could see the future as it would be if this continued, and it was not a pleasant vision.

Harry would continue trying. He did not know what giving up meant, and Snape meant too much to him now for Harry to yield him easily. But if Snape gave no quarter, went on sneering and acting as though Harry meant nothing to him, then Harry would eventually draw away. He would become more distant, and that would involve less direct pain and more indirect, the same kind Snape had suffered when Harry was angry at him over bringing his parents and Dumbledore to trial. And the more time passed, the more Snape himself would consider the chasm unbridgeable, and so he would not try, and so Harry would have less reason to try, and so Snape would feel further pushed away.

Did he want to live through something like that again, and this time with the knowledge that he had not done this for Harry's protection, but to protect himself?

At the same time, he did not know how he could go among werewolves, even for Harry. And he did not know when the next good chance might come for trying to rid himself of this fear.

It went against everything he was to attend this festival. It was a test of courage, and he was no Gryffindor. It was a means of getting close to Harry again, and he was rapidly proving that he was no parent. It was opening himself up to further pain, and he was not a weakling.

But—

Things had already changed. What Snape had engaged in was a desperate attempt to put things back the way they were, and he knew that was not going to work. He had sneered at those in the past who had attempted it, including James Potter, when he heard that the man had retreated from Auror work rather than face the fact that he'd used the Unforgivables.

He could stand to live with hatred and contempt from the outside world. He did not think he could stand to live with how much he would despise himself if he acted so irrationally.

He looked up to see that Harry was backing out of the room, his gaze on the floor. And, for the first time in what felt like similar weeks, a surge of emotion that wasn't for himself ran through him.

He has endured too much pain already, too much surrender of every important adult in his life. I do not want him to endure this.

"Harry," he said softly.

Harry paused, but didn't look up at him. His head was turned to the side, listening, but ready to accept a refusal.

"I will attend."

Harry lifted his head and looked up at him.

What he saw in Harry's face gave Snape the first joy he had felt since he arrived at the Sanctuary.

Connor turned away from the duel when he felt someone press against Lux Aeterna's wards, which meant Peter got in a spell that knocked him from his feet. Connor groaned as he stood up slowly, rubbing the side of his head. He'd hit the wall hard. "Not funny," he complained.

"It would certainly not be funny if someone did that to you in the middle of a real duel," Peter snapped. Connor eyed him warily. Sometimes he got more like Snape than Connor was comfortable with. "You must always keep your eyes on the eyes and wand of your opponent, Connor. It is the only thing that will save your life most of the time. Is that understood?"

"Yes," said Connor quickly. "It's just—someone is pressing against the wards." He concentrated a little harder, letting the wards talk to him in their very odd mixture of images and impressions of a magical signature. He blinked. "It's Harry."

Peter had opened his mouth again, probably to give him a lecture about how fighting in the midst of wards was no excuse to let himself be distracted, but now he blinked and said, "Harry?"

Connor nodded and ran along the corridor to the entrance hall, dropping the wards as he did so. Despite the fact that he knew something bad must have happened for Harry to return so early—it couldn't be that he'd heard what was happening to Connor, because Connor hadn't sent him any of his letters—he found his eagerness soaring at the thought of seeing his brother.

I can't wait to see what he's like now, he thought, as he jumped over the last five steps in the main staircase and heard Peter shout sternly at him for catching the banister and using it to swing himself around. Is he all healed? Will he have a different personality? Will he be more like Ron? Or will he be like Hermione because he studied all summer?

The doors of the entrance hall opened just as he reached them. Harry stood there, wearing casual robes and blazing with power.

“Connor?” he asked, moments before his brother caught him up in an embrace so tight he lost all his air. The hug sent them staggering several steps, until they sat down in the mud. Connor did not care.

“Harry,” he muttered, clinging tight. The satisfaction had given place to more complex emotions, including a rush of relaxation that seemed to loosen all the permanently stiff muscles in his back and neck. His older brother was back. Harry would protect him and make him feel better. He always did.

Harry looped his arm around his brother’s shoulders and hugged back, then looked up with a smile. “Hello, Peter,” he said.

“Harry.”

Connor slipped out of the way, and Harry stepped forward and hugged Peter. Connor told himself firmly that honorable Gryffindors did not feel envious of others. He didn’t feel jealous of the way that Peter watched Harry, with soft eyes he’d never shown Connor. He didn’t.

I could always go to the Burrow if I wanted someone to look at me like that, he reminded himself.

“What brings you back from the Sanctuary before the end of August?” Peter asked.

Harry grinned wryly. “Organizing alliances. You haven’t read the Prophet the last few days?”

Peter shook his head. “We found the articles too upsetting,” he said, and reached out and put a casual hand on Connor’s shoulder. Connor felt his envy die. “The articles about the werewolves, especially.”

Harry nodded, eyes rapidly scanning Peter's face. "Yes, I can imagine," he muttered. "Well. I came to invite you to a festival that I'm going to hold at Copley-by-the-Sea in five days, to celebrate the fact that I'm sixteen and Black heir, basically." He looked at Connor. "It should be your festival, too."

Connor shook his head, feeling very adult. "No, go on," he said generously. "I've had loads of birthdays I could feel proud of. You were made to feel—differently. Besides, I'm not Black heir."

Harry flashed him a smile and started to say something, but Peter interrupted then. "Harry," he said softly. "I do have a favor to ask you."

Harry faced him and raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

Peter nodded. "I'd like to take Connor and stay with you for the rest of the summer. Someone sent a Portkey by owl that would have taken Connor and tried to transport him—elsewhere. And there has been someone testing the wards." His voice lowered. "I thought it might have been Remus. He did write Connor, once."

Harry's face changed at once. Connor supposed it might have scared someone else, but it only fascinated him. He watched as Harry lifted his head and narrowed his eyes, hunting. A wind of pink and green specks lashed around him and traveled away, circling Lux Aeterna's wards. Connor felt Harry's magic on them as a faint, tickling pressure, a sniffing hound.

The wind came back to Harry just after it had reached the place where the stranger had pressed. Harry closed his eyes, then snapped them open and nodded at Peter. "Yes," he said tightly. "Come with me at once."

"I need to pack!" Connor protested. There was no way that he was leaving Lux Aeterna without his Nimbus, protective older brother or not.

"I'll stay here while you do it." Harry folded his arms in his "I'm your older brother, don't argue with me" pose. Connor was tempted to

remind him that he was only older by fifteen minutes, but Peter got there first.

“Who was it?” he demanded.

“Evan Rosier,” Harry said.

Connor felt his enthusiasm for staying at Lux Aeterna diminish. The prospect of being in the same tightly-warded house as Harry suddenly looked brilliant.

Remus felt badly out of sorts, and out of place. Oh, he'd been in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place before; that was the whole reason Harry had asked him to remain here with this half of the pack, while he took the rest of Remus's packmates to Copley-by-the-Sea.

No. Not the whole of the reason.

And that was precisely it. Harry had avoided looking at Remus on the night of the alliance meeting, and hadn't firecalled or owled him at all yesterday. Remus had been looking forward to it. He wanted to see Harry again, so that he could explain some things that Harry might have misunderstood.

Remus had known of Loki's plans to give the pack into Harry's protection since a few days before he did it. He approved. Harry could and would protect them, and when he was surrounded by accepted werewolves, unavoidably exposed to their culture, then they could tell him the truth without betraying mysteries that no outsiders should know. That he was just a wizard and not a werewolf didn't matter any longer, not with him acting as alpha. Remus had assumed he would help to ease the transition, since he'd been part of both Harry's life and the pack's.

Instead, there was silence for a day.

But now Remus smelled powerful magic. He put down the book he'd been reading and stepped out of the library, turning his head back and forth. He knew Harry had arrived, but he was surprised no one else had come and told him. The others were mostly still cautious

around Harry, and not sure whether he deserved to be their alpha, even though they trusted Loki's judgment and knew he could not stay. Vengeance for a mate was more important than anything else. But Harry was—well, a wizard, and they had all seen him threaten Loki in the Ministry a few days before he left.

Remus understood in a moment, though. Harry stood at the end of the hallway, regarding Remus without any expression at all. His magic billowed around him, and Remus could hear the portrait of Sirius's mother in the hallway below starting a crooning song in praise of his strength.

"The wards on this house are keyed to me," Harry said, answering Remus's silent question. "They won't alert anyone I'm coming if I don't want them to."

Remus nodded, and stepped out of the way, letting Harry walk into the library. It was more like stalk, actually. Remus sniffed cautiously. Harry didn't smell angry, though he walked that way. He was—determined. Like an alpha having to discipline a subordinate who had been causing rows.

Harry turned around in the middle of the library, and faced Remus again. His stare was disquieting. Remus turned his head gently to the side, to avoid meeting the aggressive gaze of his alpha.

"I came to invite you and the rest of the pack to a festival I'm holding in five days, to celebrate my being Black heir and the pack coming together," Harry said.

"Oh." Remus shifted his weight. "And that is the only reason?"

"No." Harry's voice went blunt as a hammer. "It's also to inform you that I love you, but I don't trust you. I will never trust you again, unless you prove that you can be trusted."

Remus blinked and glanced up, shaken at a level he hadn't known existed in himself. Of course, Loki had never expressed distrust of him. He didn't have to, when he'd done the work of convincing

Remus of the rightness of his goals himself. "I won't betray the pack, Harry. You know that."

"Someone betrayed my location to two would-be assassins yesterday," said Harry. And waited.

Remus stared at him.

"Camellia and the rest of them all knew," Harry said. "I know that they could have firecalled Grimmauld Place; I gave them permission to, after all. And if someone here knew, and someone here wrote a letter..." He let his voice trail off. Then he shrugged.

Remus snarled. "I would never do such a thing. Never!"

Harry tilted his head, his eyes locked on Remus's. Remus didn't look away this time, and didn't care if it was a challenge. He felt more like a wizard than a werewolf right now. Harry was accusing him of betrayal, and it wasn't true.

"A Legilimens can tell when someone is lying," said Harry. "So, now I know you didn't. This time."

"And it would never happen," Remus insisted, feeling his outrage grow. The Sanctuary had helped him accept some of his emotions. The pack had helped him accept many more. He no longer felt apologetic for any anger he discovered inside himself, as he would have two years ago, fearing the explosion of beast-like rage that haunted most werewolves bitten as children. "What makes you think it would?"

Harry's eyes hardened again. "Because of the way that you changed your mind about your principles, in such a fundamental way, and never had the courtesy to tell me?" he said softly. "Because of the fact that you suspected, beforehand, things like Loki's pack biting a Wizengamot member and Loki coming to Hogwarts to threaten Snape and Draco—"

“I did not have prior knowledge of that,” said Remus. “Loki wouldn’t have asked me to choose between loyalties like that. He kept it from me.”

“You were willing to attack innocent people, bend their free wills, and you didn’t tell me,” said Harry. Remus fought the urge to back up a step. While the Sanctuary had helped him become more self-confident, it seemed to have made Harry colder. His magic smelled like winter now, and Remus could almost feel an icy, intelligent mind watching him eagerly, waiting for its master’s signal to spring. “You sent post to Connor trying to change his mind. You gave Loki knowledge about me without my consent. Did you know that he considered biting me, Remus? Would you have bitten me, if he asked you to?”

Remus shook his head, but not in denial. He didn’t know. He’d trusted Loki not to put him in that position. No one could have anticipated Gudrun’s murder, and the way that Harry had turned out not to care as much about the rights of werewolves as Remus had thought he did.

“We’ve been ignored for so long,” he told Harry. The feeling of winter in the air increased. “Wizards didn’t pay attention to us. You were a wizard—sworn to help us, but still. You have all sorts of unconscious prejudices in favor of your own kind, Harry. We couldn’t trust we’d break through to you if we just talked and waited. We’ve been doing that for decades, and the anti-werewolf laws just got worse instead of better. And it’s a betrayal of our culture to talk to outsiders about it, unless they’ve accepted the gift themselves. Do you see? It was an unfortunate combination of circumstances, but there you are.”

“You started feeling that anything was justified, because you’d been pushed aside and ignored for so long.” Harry’s voice was flat.

Remus glanced up, relieved. “Yes! Exactly. You can only do that to people for so long before you have a revolution, you know.”

Harry’s eyes changed again, growing weary. Remus felt the icy claws of his magic retract, and relaxed a little.

“What I can’t forget, Remus,” said Harry quietly, “is that other people don’t stop suffering just because you are. Pain doesn’t take turns, doesn’t play favorites. By the very nature of my commitment to the vates path, I can’t enable a werewolf revolution that increases the total amount of pain in the world just to lessen or make up for werewolf pain—and especially not one that rides on vengeance.”

Remus drew in a sharp breath. “But so much of our culture rides on that, Harry—“

“And I’m not going to make you change it,” Harry said. “I will tell you that, since you’re sworn to be part of my alliance now, you’ll have to step out of it before you can take mindless vengeance. And that will deprive you of my protection. Think before acting, Remus.”

Remus felt lost again. Why couldn’t Harry understand? The suffering of the werewolves had gone ignored the longest. Muggleborns at least had a champion in Dumbledore. Harry himself had aided other magical creatures. But werewolves would have no one unless they forced the matter—and then when they did, Harry refused to offer whole-hearted support.

Remus had assumed that, since he was both wizard and werewolf, with a good experience of both cultures in his robe pockets, but with ultimate loyalties to the pack, he would be able to make Harry see sense. It seemed that attempt was doomed to falter.

“If you would just trust me—“ he tried.

“Not until you prove you can be trusted,” said Harry.

“What would do that for you?” Remus asked desperately. This wasn’t only a champion for his pack; this was the boy he had helped raise and still loved, James’s son, Sirius’s godson. It was so hard to see him standing here, cold, unforgiving, ruthless.

“I can’t give you a single test,” said Harry. “If you want to reconcile with me, Remus, you’ll meet me halfway, and believe me, I’ll notice when that starts happening. So far, you just want concessions. It’s not acceptable. If you don’t want to attend the festival, don’t.” He

turned and walked out of the library, Apparating between one step and the next.

Remus sat down and put his head in his hands.

Chapter Ten: Mysterious Enemies

"And you think that we'll be able to get all the food we need from Muggle shops?" Camellia's eyes were wide and disbelieving.

Harry shrugged. "Rose assured me that we would." Rose had been born Muggle, too, he'd discovered, but she'd grown up in the Muggle world, and had been nineteen when she was bitten. She was sure that she knew her way among the shops of London. Her mate, Bavaros, a wizard, was going with her anyway, to change some of Harry's Galleons to Muggle money in Diagon Alley, and because he generally seemed to disapprove of Rose venturing into non-magical places without someone to protect her. Camellia had told Harry that he still secretly believed Rose would go running back to her family, given half a chance, even though her family had tossed her out, unable to deal with what she was.

That was one thing Harry had learned already: not to interfere in a werewolf's mating bond. There were several mated pairs in the pack, and they acted as if they loved and as if they hated each other at the same time, one moment mouthing each other's chins, the next moment knocking each other to the ground in a snapping, snarling whirlwind. Harry might have spoken with Bavaros if he was Rose's husband, using it both as a way to get to know a new ally and to ease his fears, but since he was Rose's mate, Camellia had explained, Harry would only have made him more paranoid.

"Next, invitations," Harry said, turning with a nod to Trumpetflower, the werewolf he'd put in charge of those.

"Most of the pack leaders you owled have responded," the young woman said, as she spread the letters over the kitchen table. She was the answer to Draco's question about whether werewolves ever bathed, Harry thought in distant amusement. Her hair was long and brown and straight and perfectly clean, and she had nails that looked as if she cared for hands for a living. "Tiger didn't, but he wouldn't have anyway; he doesn't communicate with wizards. Yuna is busy overseeing a newly mated pair in her pack and can't come. Liberty distrusts you." She looked up, blinking. "But the others all will attend the festival. Seventeen pack leaders out of twenty is not bad, Wild."

Harry grimaced. The werewolves had started calling him Wild. He'd asked why, and received a surprised look from Trumpetflower, and a, "That's the way you smell," from Camellia. That wouldn't have been so bad, but now they were using it like a title.

He had more important things to worry about, though, so he chose not to pursue it for right now. "Most of them know about the danger the Department presents?"

Trumpetflower nodded. "They'll be staying close to home when the full moon comes. Of course, we can't tell where the Department plans to strike next. We were an obvious choice, since we were Loki's pack, but now?" She shook her head, and Harry saw the worry she was valiantly trying to mask in her eyes. Everything about her screamed "sheltered pureblood," though Harry didn't know her original name or family. "Perhaps they'll come after us again."

"They had best not," said Harry mildly, and a half-open cupboard lit as if it were turned to gold. Camellia leaned forward, bathing in the smell of the magic, while Trumpetflower gave him a small smile.

"We trust you to protect us, Wild," she said softly. "But it's frightening, knowing that we could be killed at any time they find us in wolf form." She shuddered and hugged herself, her eyes shadowed. "Not to mention the new laws."

Harry took a deep breath so that nothing more violent would happen than a wind flying around the room. "Those also displease me," he said.

What the Department witches had hinted at in the corridors of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had become "official" law the next day. Werewolves going out in public were supposed to wear collars at all times and carry registration papers with them, just in case anyone else had a question about who they were. The collars, the smug Daily Prophet reporter named Gina de Rousseau had explained, were intended strictly as a means of identification and not magical restriction.

Harry did not care. Even if it had been necessary for the Ministry to identify werewolves on sight, and he did not believe it was, why choose collars? That was done for no other purpose than degrading them. He had written to Scrimgeour when the news came out, a simple letter. Had he known about this the day that Harry visited him?

No response had come. Harry didn't know if that meant that Scrimgeour's post was watched so closely that the Minister didn't dare risk writing to him, or if someone had intercepted his message. He was leaning towards interception, since the Minister hadn't communicated with him in any other way, either.

He's probably upset, too, Harry thought, with me as well as with Amelia Bones or whoever else pushed this idiotic law into effect. I brought werewolves into the Ministry. I'm pushing.

He intended to keep on pushing. He'd asked a few of the werewolves to look through the Black law books while he spoke with his allies and made other arrangements for the festival, and they'd turned up a tiny loophole that Harry hadn't known existed. It was a way to interfere in the Ministry that was on the up and up, because, of course, the old pureblood families had bullied the Wizengamot into making some special dispensations just for them while they still had the power.

There were times that Harry knew he really had to thank Regulus for making him Black heir, and this was one of them.

The man who opened the door stared hard at Harry. Harry stared back. He was flat-eyed and blank-faced, though Harry knew this particular blankness probably hid cunning and not stupidity. In other words, he looked rather like his son, Marcus, who had been Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team for the first three years Harry had been at Hogwarts.

"Mr. Flint, sir?" he asked. "Aurelius Flint?"

"Harry vates," said the man, without a trace of a smile, and stepped out of the way. "For what reason has someone so great come to visit my office?"

Harry took the hint and stepped inside; he had got through the wand checkpoint with Erica's help again, arriving at the time he knew she worked, but it would look rather strange for him to be visiting a minor flunky in the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures. "A talk, that's all," he said. "Marcus commended you to me once. Said you'd been a great Quidditch player in your day, and we might have a thing or two in common."

He sat down in the chair in front of the desk. Aurelius Flint sat down behind it, his large, clear eyes still fixed on Harry. "I was never a Seeker," he replied. "But I played Beater, yes."

Harry nodded. "So that's one thing in common," he said. He reached into his robe pocket and pulled out the image of the seal he'd copied, carefully, from the image on the page of the legal book. It was the Black family crest, but in place of the motto *Toujours pur*, it carried the words *Amicitia percutere*. Aurelius picked it up and examined it for a moment without any sign of recognition.

Harry was watching, though, and saw his cheeks flush faintly.

A moment later, he lowered the seal to the desk and nodded. "Yes," he said. "The one who works in this office does indeed accept the obligation to serve the Black family, vates. And you are the legal heir of the Blacks, correct?"

"And acting head, while Regulus Black is recovering from a wound he took from an attempt on his life," said Harry. It was the first time he'd had to use the cover story, since few people outside of his small circle of allies cared where Regulus had gone. "Therefore, I am asking you to perform a small service for me."

Aurelius nodded, as though he had such requests asked of him all the time. "What is it?"

"There were new werewolf laws just announced to the public," Harry said, taking the image of the seal back. "To make them wear collars and carry identification. I want to know who proposed them."

“Amelia Bones,” Aurelius said, looking relieved to be discharged of the obligation so easily.

“How sure are you of that information?” Harry asked. If it really and truly was her, without a doubt, he would accept that, but he no longer thought the terrified woman he’d seen on the second of August was entirely in control of herself. If someone was behind the scenes, pressuring her, he wanted to know who it was.

Aurelius hesitated.

Harry nodded. “That’s right. There are other players now—the other Department Heads, the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts, and doubtless people I don’t know of. I want you to find out where this particular idea originated, or at least come as close as you can. Amelia Bones was the mouthpiece, but I don’t think she was the brain that thought it up.”

Aurelius extended his hand across the desk. Harry watched him curiously, until he heard the man say, in a deep voice with a hint of a shake to it, “I formally request and require to be relieved of this obligation. I will owe you a debt if you will release me—two debts, the original obligation plus the one I owe to your goodness. I will pay those debts gladly. But I ask to be relieved of this.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed, this time fixed on the way that the man’s cheeks had turned pale. He knows, or at least suspects, who proposed those new laws.

And he’s terrified.

He had to move carefully, that much was clear. Harry had come to Aurelius Flint only because he had the office with the old dispensation pinned on it to oblige the person who worked in it to serve the Black line, but perhaps Aurelius, himself, as a person, was more connected than that. Lucius Malfoy might know.

Harry nodded as though he had considered the matter and made up his mind. Aurelius closed his eyes, his hand falling to the desk. Harry

had his eyes fastened on his fingers, though, and noticed the way two of them curved and pointed down.

Towards the floor? Someone in the office below is listening to us?

No, perhaps below in the Ministry.

Once he thought about it, of course, Harry could only come up with one candidate for Aurelius's terror. The Department of Mysteries. The Unspeakables. And their offices were on a level below the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures.

Harry nodded again, more firmly this time. Aurelius caught his eye and retracted his fingers into a fist. Then he sat back, calm and imperturbable once more, and looked at into Harry's face.

"And what do you want of me?" he asked.

"I'd like a list of every law on the books that affects werewolves," Harry said. "Since you work in this Department, I think you can provide that for me easily."

Aurelius nodded.

"And for my second request..." Harry cocked his head and stood. "I think I'll keep that in abeyance for right now."

The man looked briefly sour, no doubt wanting to pay off both his debts right away, but stood to show Harry to the door. As he opened it for him, he stooped close to Harry, long enough, to whisper, "Be careful," in a voice Harry thought he would never have heard if not for his magic.

Harry caught Aurelius's eye and moved his head in a tiny nod. Aurelius seemed satisfied as he shut the door behind him.

Harry wrapped his Complete Vanishing spell around him and began to move rapidly in the direction of the lifts. He'd come alone, because secrecy, in this case, was more important than impressing anyone. Now he wanted to get out of the Ministry as soon as possible. The

Department of Mysteries studied magic at its deepest levels, and magical artifacts that did Merlin-knew-what. They might, for all Harry knew, be perfectly aware of his presence here, with undetectable wards that saw everything. Aurelius had certainly acted as if that were the case.

But I don't understand why they'd be pushing for more laws against werewolves. Why? What would the point of it be?

He reached the lifts and pressed the button that would summon one. As he stood waiting for it, he heard footsteps, light and swift and almost silent, the steps of an experienced hunter or spy, coming up the corridor from behind him.

He turned. A wizard in a shimmering gray cloak that cast back the light was gliding down the hallway. If Harry hadn't known to expect something like that from the footsteps, he might not ever have seen him.

Or her. The cloak was so muffling that it gave no hint of body shape.

The Unspeakables already figured out that I spoke with Aurelius, it seems.

Harry's lift arrived then, with a melodic voice on it announcing, "Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures." As the doors opened, Harry saw the Unspeakable's head turn and orient on him.

He walked into the lift, confident that his spell would protect him from being sensed; that was what it was designed to do, after all. A moment later, the Unspeakable walked in after him.

Harry pushed the button for the Atrium. The Unspeakable did nothing, simply standing there with head and shoulders bowed in his gray cloak, like an old man. Harry didn't think he could be, not with the way he moved, but it did effectively keep anyone from seeing his face.

The lift began to rattle downwards. Harry waited, his hand resting lightly on his chest. His magic, contained by the spell around him,

hummed and buzzed. The Unspeakable still did nothing. Harry wondered if he really had any idea where Harry was, or simply knew that someone invisible on the lift going down would have to be him. Strange that he hadn't lunged and tried to grab me when I pushed the button for the Atrium.

"The Atrium," the voice sang as they reached that level, and the doors opened. A moment later, the Unspeakable moved to stand in front of them.

So that's how he thinks he'll capture me. Harry knew he could ram into the man and the Complete Vanishing spell would prevent him from feeling anything, but knocking him backwards would alert any of the Unspeakables waiting on this level.

Standing in the lift and being captured was not an option either, however. Besides, Harry's blood was up, and after these new werewolf laws and what he'd just learned from Aurelius Flint, he wasn't content to appear and explain matters to his enemies.

They're playing. What kind of game, I don't know yet. But let's show them what waits on the opposite side of the board.

He let the Extabesco plene go. The Unspeakable immediately swayed towards him, reaching out a gloved hand. He still said nothing. Harry supposed the silence was meant to unnerve his victim.

His hand flashed. He was carrying something small and silver in it, probably a magical artifact.

Harry had no intention of flinging magic directly at the artifact, which looked like a collar of some kind. With his luck, it would reflect at him or be absorbed. He shook his fringe back from his lightning bolt scar, instead, and opened his mouth in a loud, shocked wail.

The Unspeakable jerked back at the sound. Harry ducked under his arm and emerged into the Atrium, crying, "Help! Oh, help!"

He heard footsteps heading for him almost at once. And, sure enough, the first person to round the corner was Erica, the wand registration

witch, lunging through the gates and towards the lifts. She saw him, and her eyes widened as she also saw the Unspeakable.

Harry felt a surge of vicious satisfaction. They want to do things in secret? Let's drag them into the public eye, and see what they think when they're accused of trying to kidnap the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Harry!" Erica exclaimed. "Are you all right?"

Harry saw the flash of another gray cloak as an Unspeakable loomed behind her, too. More footsteps were pounding, and while some of them might be visitors or Ministry personnel who would help, others were almost surely reinforcements from the Department of Mysteries. Harry suspected there wasn't much they wouldn't try to do to insure that this stayed secret.

He flung out his hand, whispering, "Exsculpo," a spell of his own creation. The hand reaching for Erica's shoulder disappeared, erased from existence. The Unspeakable gave a shocked wail of his—her—own, and Erica whipped around and saw her. She raised her wand as Harry reached her side, eyes narrowed.

"Stupefy!" she yelled, and the beam of red light struck the Unspeakable, who lay still. Erica giggled nervously.

Other gray cloaks were flashing from the corners of Harry's eyes now, and he suspected the Unspeakables had mostly cleared this floor, though they'd left Erica so anyone just arriving would see nothing obviously wrong. He grasped Erica's hand and began pulling her hard through the gates. Erica was more than willing to come with him, though she looked back now and then as Harry started her towards the fountain.

"Who are they?" she asked.

"Unspeakables," said Harry, and saw Erica's face drain of color. He nodded at her. "I'm afraid that I've just got you sacked from the Ministry," he said. "How would you like a new job?"

“Wand-checking is really all I know how to do—” Erica babbled as she finally began to run on her own, heading for the lift that would take them up to the decrepit telephone box and the alley.

“You can do that for me,” Harry breathed. “And a few other things, too.” He had seen, though Erica hadn’t, the gray cloak trailing in front of them, trying to block their access to the telephone box. He would have to risk his magic in a moment.

Then the Unspeakable revealed himself, flicking out a red shell that Harry was more than familiar with. A Still-Beetle shell, it would imprison him, and his magic, if it managed to touch him; they were used for confining Lord-level wizards accused of crimes.

Harry thought of Doncan, and the Opallines, and the fire-blackened stone on which Gollrish Y Thie stood, and opened his mouth. Intense white heat roared forth from it, a concentrated blast, taking and melting the shell in mid-air.

The heat also flew at the Unspeakable, who lifted his hand. A silver ring sparking on his finger caught in the light and gleamed, absorbing the flame into it. Then he drew out a tiny glass sphere, filled with what looked, to Harry’s speed-confused eyes, like a rose, and gave it a delicate flick towards Harry.

Harry could feel its magic as it flew, throbbing through the air with a power to rival his own. He didn’t dare touch it. He grabbed Erica’s arm, spinning her safely behind him, and did something he hadn’t done in more than a month, opening the conduit of his absorbere gift inside him as wide as it would go.

The magic that rushed down his “gullet” was a much more pleasant meal than the tainted magic of the Death Eaters or Voldemort. It rang with power, though, and Harry shuddered as he was forced to gulp hastily, draining in a few seconds what he would ordinarily have taken minutes to swallow. He could already sense the sphere had something to do with time.

Nasty things they study in the Department of Mysteries.

The sphere landed on the floor in front of him and shattered, drained of magic. The Unspeakable made a sound for the first time, a snarl.

Harry lifted his eyes. He was shuddering with the effort of containing the magic, which rampaged back and forth through him, more sentient than the power he dealt with usually. That came of being confined under pressure in such a tiny space, he thought. He felt wild and sweet in a way that usually only the phoenix song made him feel, and it was an effort to speak, instead of sing or roar.

“Move.”

The Unspeakable was not stupid, whatever else might be said about him. He moved. Harry grabbed Erica’s hand and pulled her behind him. He could no longer hear the other Unspeakables’ footsteps. He supposed they were afraid of being drained of their magic, or at least of having their artifacts drained, if they came anywhere near him.

He pushed Erica into the lift and turned to watch the Unspeakables. The nearest one stood with arms folded, or so Harry assumed from the slight shift in the cloak, surveying him.

Calm, Harry noted. They’re not very worried about what I’m going to do when I get out of here, then. They probably think they can counter any publicity about this, and of course no one in the Ministry is going to dare to speak up in support of me, not if they’re all as terrified as Aurelius.

A second Unspeakable stepped up beside the one who’d tossed the sphere as the lift began to rattle and move. He carried what looked like a Pensieve, shimmering with a blue liquid rather than a silver. The first man pressed his gloved fingers into the liquid and tossed it towards the lift. Harry watched warily as it splattered, uselessly, far below.

“Obliviate,” the Unspeakable intoned casually.

Beside Harry, Erica gave a little gasp and shudder, and then said, in a dazed voice, “What? Where am I? What happened?”

Harry could feel the powerful compulsion to forget burrowing into his own brain, tearing at him with jagged teeth. He brought up his Occlumency shields, but the compulsion ate right through them. He snarled and brought his magic and his will up in defense, fighting as he had fought when Dumbledore tried to compel him in the past.

The spell shattered so suddenly that Harry sagged to his knees. He shook his head and braced his hand on the floor of the lift, pushing himself back upright. He looked down into the hooded faces of the Unspeakables, watching calmly as the lift went up, and up.

With artifacts like that, who else can they touch? Harry thought. Anyone in the Ministry, certainly. Scrimgeour. Aurelius. Percy. And Merlin knows who they might go after outside the Ministry. What do the Unspeakables do? Important Ministry business. So important that, of course, if they do need to Oblivate their victims later, that's accepted as the normal order of things.

He shuddered. The Ministry had another cancer inside it, then, one that hadn't revealed itself until now. The Department of Mysteries was stirring. At least some of the Unspeakables wanted to have werewolves as isolated from the rest of wizarding society as possible.

Why?

Harry smiled grimly. He didn't know yet. He would find out. But going to the papers might not be the best course after all. If the Unspeakables hadn't cleared the Atrium and destroyed the memory of his only witness, then yes. But with only him to claim the truth of the story, and with the Unspeakables holding so many other lives in their hands, and with the currently broiling, brewing nature of the public mind as concerned the Boy-Who-Lived, trying to expose them to more than his allies right now would be suicide.

He was not panicking, though, as he once would have when reminded that the Unspeakables could hurt so many people at so many different times and with magical artifacts whose nature he didn't yet know. The Unspeakables would be fools to start hurting people simply because they could. Their whole power was in remaining undetectable, and in advancing whatever mysterious, no pun

intended, goals their Department held. They must believe that Harry had figured out their power and would enter a stalemate with them for the sake of the innocent, even as he stared into every shadow and wondered which ones they cast. They wouldn't want to give him an excuse to swoop down on them with magical claws extended.

If they had done this before he went to the Sanctuary, their reading of him might even have been accurate.

Now, though, it wasn't. Harry fully intended to use his magic, though they wouldn't know it until it was too late.

"You haven't answered me," said Erica, a bit of a whine in her voice as the lift finally lurched to a stop. "What am I—" And then she gasped and looked down to see his lightning bolt scar. "Harry?"

Harry gripped her hand tightly. "Yes," he said. "I'm sorry, Erica, but I rescued you from powerful enemies who just Obliviated you, and I'm afraid your job at the Ministry's gone. Do you trust me to take care of you?"

Erica nodded eagerly, looking close to swooning. "Who were they?"

"Tell you when we're safe," said Harry, and, pulling her close to him the moment they stepped out into the graffiti-covered alley, Apparated.

"Sir?" Harry asked, peering around the door into the room of Copley-by-the-Sea Snape had taken as his lab. "Can I have a word with you?"

Snape turned from stirring a bubbling purple potion and nodded. "Of course, Harry. A moment." He tapped the cauldron with his wand, uttering a spell to preserve the potion in its present state, and then came to sit in one of the solid, comfortable chairs in the center of the room.

Harry let himself collapse into the other one. He'd just come back from the Ministry, and settled Erica into one of the numerous unused rooms of the house. He'd reassured Draco and Camellia that he was

having Aurelius Flint look up all the anti-werewolf laws currently on the books, but told them nothing about the attack by the Unspeakables yet. There was something he wanted to do first, before he had to deal with all the shouting and sworn oaths of vengeance.

“You have a Pensieve, sir?” he asked.

Snape’s eyes narrowed minutely. “Of course.”

Harry sighed. “Can I use it?”

Snape nodded, his eyes still on Harry as he stood up, moved over to a cabinet on the far wall, and unlocked it. Harry watched him back, as placidly as he could when he’d just had someone trying to capture him. Snape had been acting more like his normal self in the last day, especially because he’d avoided werewolves entirely. Harry didn’t want to upset his equilibrium too much.

Besides, he wasn’t frightened. Just really, really angry.

Snape brought the Pensieve over and set it down in front of him. Harry hesitated for a moment, then held out his hand and murmured, “Accio wand.” He wasn’t actually sure how to get the memories from his head into a Pensieve without a wand.

The length of cypress came flying through Snape’s half-open door and settled into his fingers. Harry gave a satisfied little grunt and then touched it to his temple, recalling the Unspeakable attack in all the details he could. In moments, strands of silvery thought began to unloop from the skin, and he moved his wand over to drop them into the Pensieve. It didn’t take long, and he sat back with a little sigh. At least now he had one record of what had happened to him, just in case something else happened to him, and he would make more.

“May I?” Snape asked, indicating the Pensieve.

“If you promise not to destroy the room when you’re done,” said Harry evenly.

Snape raised an eyebrow, murmured, "I promise," and then bowed his head so that he could plunge his face into the Pensieve. Harry rose and began to pace back and forth, swearing aloud and in his head, his hand clasped around his stump behind his back.

I'm going to have to dig deeper with this than I ever meant to, he thought. I thought it was ordinary human fear that was guiding the anti-werewolf laws. And I thought that I could remove a few key players from positions of power in the Ministry and be done with most of the force behind their legal campaign against werewolves. This—this goes deeper. Much deeper. Literally.

The most damaging part about this right now is the lack of information. I need to know as much about the Department of Mysteries as I can. I'll write to Lucius Malfoy and ask him about that, as well as about Aurelius Flint. He thrives on the corruption in the Ministry, Merlin knows, and if anyone can locate a corrupt Unspeakable or someone willing to talk about the Department for money, he can.

But I also need to dig in and be prepared to defend my allies against any attacks. I need to have as many advantages on my side as I can.

And I also need to be ready to take the offensive. The release of the Grand Unified Theory is coming soon, and the anti-werewolf laws are rolling forward, and I don't think the stalemate between Scrimgeour and the Department Heads can last forever. And sooner or later, Willoughby is going to get someone to listen to him about this stupid trial, if only as a means of stopping me. And I need to know what Whitestag's doing. And school's starting soon. And Merlin knows what the wizards in other countries watching this from the outside think.

He tried to slow his pacing, but it only went faster as new ideas exploded in his head like fireworks.

Most urgent, besides finding out as much about the Unspeakables as I can, is establishing a line of communication with Scrimgeour. Owl post doesn't work, obviously. But—

Harry felt a shark's smile widen across his mouth. Fred and George, of course. No one's going to think it strange they're communicating with me, not when I gave them the money to open their joke shop. And Percy's their brother. It'll take a while to figure out how they're not going to get caught, but that should do nicely.

He laughed, and then heard the absolutely foul oath behind him, combined with the pressure of building magic.

He whirled around, and saw Snape pulling his head out of the Pensieve, his face darker than Harry had seen it since a werewolf from Loki's pack had laid her teeth on his skin. He flung up a hand, and a bookshelf on the other side of the room juddered and started to pull itself free of the wall.

Harry shook his head and tugged on Snape's magic with his absorbere gift, not swallowing it but catching his guardian's attention. "You promised you wouldn't destroy the room," he pointed out.

"Those—" Snape began, and then snarled again. The air around him briefly grew a series of writhing claws.

Harry nodded. "I know. And I am going to fight them."

Snape shook his head. "How?" He had obviously figured out the same problems with fighting the Department of Mysteries that Harry had.

"Information," said Harry crisply. "From Lucius Malfoy, if I can, and establishing a line to Scrimgeour through Percy Weasley. And then I am going to figure out all the advantages I can, and I am going to use them." He stretched out his hand and began folding his fingers down. "I've already started studying place magic, because Woodhouse can be an enormous resource for me if I only know how to use it. I'm going to join Connor in his lessons to become an Animagus. I have allies with capacities I've never called on, who can do things that I know they can do but have never delegated them into doing. I'm going to reach out and make contact with the enemies of my enemies. I'm going to start asking questions about my parents' past, because I need to figure out what that prophecy that took Dumbledore means,

and if my parents really defied him three times.” He folded down his thumb, and sighed in annoyance at running out of fingers. “And I am going to work on getting my left hand back.”

“What has changed?” Snape asked quietly.

“I’m tired,” Harry said honestly. “It’s also the werewolves and the vates path and the fact that I’ve already committed myself to revolution, of course, but this attack made me realize just how sick and tired I am of people threatening and attacking and trying to kill and capture and bind me.” He thought back to the compulsion of the Obliviate artifact the Unspeakable had used, and how it reminded him of ways that Dumbledore and Lily had tried to enslave him. “I’ve put up with it for too long. And I don’t think fighting to defend myself is wrong any more—and there are ways I can fight on the offensive against more people than Voldemort without utterly forgetting my morals.” He glanced over his shoulder at Snape. “You showed me that, sir, when you reminded me that I had to care more about the living than the dead. I’ll do what I need to do, and live with the consequences. And I won’t let them make me afraid.”

Snape’s eyes were fierce with pride. “This time, I actually believe that you might do it, Harry,” he said.

Harry gave a wry smile. He couldn’t deny that he’d struck out before when he’d felt backed into a corner, and then not followed up when his enemies stepped away, because it wouldn’t be right. But the image of the Unspeakables Obliviating Erica, so casually, and then watching as the lift rose and Harry escaped, confident that he could do nothing to fight them, not really, had pissed him off.

“You’re well if I leave you alone, sir?” he asked. Snape’s temper was still making his magic writhe and squirm.

Snape stared hard at him. “I promise I am not going to poison any werewolves,” he said.

Harry snapped his head down in a short bow, and then turned and headed for his room. He had quill and ink and parchment there. He would write down what he remembered of the attack as well, and

then he would make a list of people he was going to delegate specific tasks to.

It's time, he thought, sorrow slipping down in him like rain across glass. I wish I could still do everything, and take on the responsibilities that should be mine, but I can't, not anymore. If I try to fight on too many fronts, I'll lose on all of them. So I'll ask Hermione to do the legal research, and some members of the pack to help with feeling out other werewolves, and Honoria to lend me some of her illusions, and others to watch enemies of mine who need to be tracked, and Draco what luck he's had with developing new spells, and Erica to help with guarding, and Peter to train me in Animagus abilities, and—

His mind pulsed smoothly, seeing far ahead. Behind it all, like a mantra, hummed a single thought.

I will not let them make me afraid.

Intermission: Before the Darkness Cower

“Really, Severus, come along.” One elegant arch of Lucius Malfoy’s eyebrow, as much to say that he didn’t know what he was going to do with Severus if he couldn’t follow a simple instruction like that. “You wouldn’t want to keep your future Lord waiting, would you?”

Severus—who thought of himself as Snape in those moments when he could, determined to pound out both his mother’s surname and the name his mother had given him from his head—kept his face calm while Malfoy was looking, but allowed himself a sneer the moment he turned away again. Malfoy embodied all the reasons that Severus hated purebloods, even as he envied them. Casual grace, yes, with a promise of steel beneath, but little real strength. Lucius’s tactics lay in devastating remarks, in noting breaches of manners and making those who committed them feel like children, in facial expressions and soft, coaxing words. But he had taught Severus to feel magic, too, as pain, in the way that Malfoys did, and the first thing Severus had realized was that he was stronger than Lucius Malfoy.

And only fools rely on raw strength, his mother’s voice sang in his head.

Severus grimaced. It was always like that, a thought that might praise or steady him coiling around with a scorpion’s sting in its tail.

The tunnel widened ahead of them, and Malfoy made a pleased sound beneath his breath, then halted. Severus could see his nostrils flaring wide to sniff. He wondered that Malfoy would be so obvious about it. He himself had already smelled the odd scent flowing down the corridor: rich, dark, earthy, with the edge of a tang that Severus could only describe as night.

“Ah,” Malfoy said, and then raised a hand and motioned Severus forward, stalking softly forward himself.

Snape followed him. They were walking through the catacombs beneath a monastery so abandoned that Muggles didn’t even remember it had existed any more. Now and then they passed alcoves filled with bones. Severus had wondered at first that the Dark

Lord chose to meet in a place like this, but Malfoy had explained it to him. The Death Eaters took their name, and the Dark Lord gave his word, as a promise of immortality. They were not, of course, afraid of death, and they would show it by standing among bones and skeletons.

Severus had kept, tightly clenched in the center of his own mind behind the Occlumency shields he had already learned, the treacherous thought that someone who sought immortality was, of course, afraid of death.

But he was not joining the Death Eaters because of any riches or glory or eternal life. He was joining because this was the one place in the world, as Malfoy had promised him, where he would be able to give his bitterness and hatred free reign. All of those people the Dark Lord would target—Mudbloods, Muggles, Light-devoted purebloods who would refuse to join him—were those who had places in the world, places that Severus was outcast from for one reason or another.

His hand tightened on his wand for a moment as he and Malfoy rounded a corner, and he remembered Tobias, his father. Tobias and Eileen had been involved in a great gyre of self-hatred; Severus remembered first realizing from the time he was four that his parents had married each other in order to destroy each other more effectively. But Tobias had at least regarded his wife with eyes full of satisfaction. He understood her. She was a witch. He had not known how to regard Severus—born to a Muggle, and yet magically stronger than his mother was—and that had pushed Severus forever, if he ever would have thought of it, out of trying to live as a Muggle. He was the child of no world, not of two.

“Kneel.”

That was the only warning Malfoy gave him before he abruptly dropped to a knee. Severus had been ready, though. Malfoy was always pulling shit like this, trying to catch Severus off-guard and make him look bad. It was the way Malfoy reminded him that, however strong he was, he would always be a halfblood.

Severus's knee touched the stone floor at the same moment Malfoy's did, and he bowed his head. He had not seen into the room ahead of them yet, had not seen the Dark Lord sitting on his dark throne.

He found that he did not need to. The breathing darkness that surrounded him, the earthy scent, was enough to give away its owner's personality. For Severus, it was like being in the belly of a beast. The beast lay licking its jaws contemplatively, while all around him great coils of strength stretched into the darkness. In a short time, it would arise and devour the world. For now, it was content to lie still and dream of its future conquests.

Severus had never been in the presence of someone so strong. Dumbledore was a Light Lord, yes, but he had long ago harnessed his power, and mostly used it to play silly games. Something about not intimidating people, and wanting them to see that not all Lords were evil, he had said the one time Severus asked.

This was someone who was not afraid to use it. This was someone who understood that limitations on power were just another form of weakness.

This was someone whose strength Severus could join in and ride, and strike back with at the ones who had hurt him.

All those thoughts raced through his head in an instant, and then the Dark Lord's voice spoke, high and cold and perfectly in tune with the fall and rise of the beast's breathing. "Lucius. Leave us."

"My lord," Malfoy said, although Severus detected a faint hint of confusion in his voice. Severus did not dare to smile over that, but he pictured Malfoy as a beast dragging a wounded leg as he escaped, and that was enough.

And then Malfoy was gone, and he was alone in the room with the Dark Lord. Severus felt Voldemort turn his regard on him.

It was not easy to bear. But Severus had not needed Lucius's warnings for that. Rumors had traveled through Slytherin House ever since the Dark Lord's sudden and spectacular appearance eight

years ago. They had whispered that this was a real Dark Lord, one who made Grindelwald look like a whipped dog. A large part of Grindelwald's strength had come from his allies, and from the Lightning Guard he hollowed out into mindless fighting automata and arranged about him. This Lord was a force to be reckoned with all by himself, either the most powerful wizard in the world or almost there, a Parselmouth, an absorber, the last descendant of Salazar Slytherin himself.

All those features added enormously to the legend, Severus had to admit, and made it easier to know what place in life the Dark Lord would take up; continuing Salazar Slytherin's work of eliminating Mudbloods was only fitting for a descendant of his. Slytherin had tried to make it happen by keeping Mudbloods from a wizarding education that would teach them to control their powers. Lord Voldemort was simply more...direct.

"I can feel your mind moving."

The words were calmer and colder than the ones spoken to Malfoy. Severus had expected that, too.

"Rise."

He stood, his eyes still carefully on the floor. He could see the bottom of a dark throne, now, the slick stone gleaming as if polished by blood. The only light in the chamber came from a group of torches arrayed about the circular walls. The light showed they were not actual torches, though. Their light was the color of death, pale white and constantly shifting, and Severus allowed himself a touch of wonder. He had heard the Dark Lord had rediscovered witchfire; he had not known he would ever see it.

The serpent wrapped three times around the throne lifted her head and hissed lazily at him. The Dark Lord laughed, and then hissed back, his hand descending in a slow caressing motion to slide along the snake's neck.

Severus listened to the breathless hissing in clinical detachment. Yes, he could see why this had captured Malfoy. Merlin knew why, but Lucius had a wild dream of becoming a Parselmouth someday.

“Why have you truly come to me?” the Dark Lord asked abruptly. “Nagini smells such bitterness in you as would become a wizard many times older than you are.”

Severus started to reply, but Voldemort cut him off before he could. “You may raise your eyes and look at me.”

Severus did that, cautiously. For one thing, meeting the eyes of a Lord-level wizard was almost never a good idea, even if he didn't have the gift of compulsion the way both Dumbledore and the Dark Lord did. For another, he knew the Dark Lord was a Legilimens.

The Dark Lord's face was wrapped and warped with shadows, the legacy, Severus knew, of long years of study in Dark magic outside of Britain. His eyes burned out of the middle of that, though, smoldering coals. Red. The force of his Legilimency reared out of them like the wolf from Norse mythology who was meant to eat the sun.

Severus had been prepared. As the Legilimency came at him, he flattened his Occlumency pools, shimmering silver shallows over the most important secrets he wanted to keep. He let the Dark Lord see everything else: the bitterness piled on bitterness that he endured when those who should have been his peers in Slytherin House discovered that he was a halfblood; the endless exploits and tricks and attempts to kill him that the Marauders engaged in; how every corner of their world granted him uneasy respect for his magical ability while putting barriers in the way of everything else; how even Professor Slughorn, his own Head of House and Potions instructor, had favored Lily Evans over him, Mudblood though she was and inferior student to Severus though she was, because she was pretty.

The dark tide sluiced over him, allowing him to somewhat study Voldemort as Voldemort studied him. Severus could feel hatred in it, and the thick film of long contact with magic based on blood and death, and the oil of indifference to suffering. The Dark Lord used pain and fear and hatred as tools to achieve his goals. He would not

let himself be distracted by the chance to make someone suffer just a bit more. He could judge torture and murder to a nicety, and know when they would be effective and when they would not.

And, of course, the Dark Lord was letting him see all this, and he knew what Severus knew, and some of those impressions might be wrong. Severus accepted that. What mattered was the magic, and the knowledge. He had no doubt that the knowledge was real. The Dark Lord had been gathering support for eight years, and that support was moving faster and faster, as almost the whole of Slytherin House rippled with growing tendrils around its sixth- and seventh-year students, as the Dark pureblood families forsook their stubbornness and listened more closely. As an avalanche gathered more power the more it rolled, so the Dark Lord was very close to his first great rising.

“Well, well, Severus.”

Severus looked up. He had been lost in his own mental impressions of the Legilimency, and had not used his physical eyes in some moments. He found the Dark Lord regarding him with—

Approval? Surely not. But he does seem to recognize something in me.

“You are utterly willing, are you not?” The Dark Lord’s voice was soft with something that might have been amusement. Severus did not mind. Amusement was one of the mildest reactions he received. Besides, the Dark Lord could be amused and still let him torture and kill and strike and use the magic that flared so restlessly inside him. He nodded.

“Very well,” the Dark Lord said. “Your initiation will be a month from now, in the middle of that first great rising.”

Severus nodded again. Unspoken were the words that if he told anyone about this, he would be dead. Of course he would. He had come into a world where the realities were simple: life and death, blood and power.

But it was a world where he had a place, a defined relationship to all of them. He was contemptuous of life, unafraid of death, a means to release blood, and a possessor of power. He was here, and they were there, arrayed about him, in directions he knew precisely.

“You will be a valuable addition to my ranks,” the Dark Lord said softly. “You know by heart lessons that many of my Death Eaters must spend months or years learning.” A long pause, while Nagini sang a crooning song and laid her head in the Dark Lord’s lap. “Your mother taught you well,” the Dark Lord finished at last.

Severus nodded again. Of course, he had not truly hoped to preserve his mother’s identity or teachings as a secret.

“You are dismissed,” the Dark Lord said. “I am pleased with you, Severus, very pleased.”

Severus bowed, and then turned and trekked out of the chamber. The passage was not long, and he had memorized all the ways that Malfoy brought him out of habit.

He had not spoken a single word in the entire audience with the Dark Lord, he realized, while for years he had tried to justify himself with words—in Slytherin House, to his father, with his professors. That, more than anything, told him that he had found a place where he belonged, and a perfect understanding with a man who would use him and discard him if he were useless—but who would also offer him the opportunity for revenge.

Severus was willing to be used, for that.

Chapter Eleven: Unspeakables (and Slytherins) Play Chess

Snape came awake with a gasp that he could not control. At least the gasp was soundless, and he pinched his lips shut immediately after allowing that puff of diseased air to escape. Then he sat up, hand closing on the wand that lay close beside his head, and snapped, "Candela."

The candle sitting on the table near his bed burst into flame. Snape studied his bedroom, or rather, the room Harry had given him, carefully in the wake of the dancing shadows. He could see nothing. The strangest sensation that he felt, now that he was awake, was the tingling of remembered pain in his left forearm, and a half-smothered desire to call himself "Severus."

He sat back, slowly, against the pillow and closed his eyes. Just before he left Gollrish Y Thie to come to Cobley-by-the-Sea, Joseph had volunteered information, quite unexpectedly, on the dreams that the Sanctuary used to heal the minds of those who refused the Seers' help.

"Usually, the dreams last only as long as the guest is in the Sanctuary." Joseph had had his hands dancing over the powdered bicorn horn, powdering it further, and he hadn't looked at Snape even when Snape stared at his back. "But then, most of our guests remain until the healing is complete. If he leaves before it is, then the dreams may pursue him, adding themselves to his mind until he faces and acknowledges the buried memories and problems the dreams want him to acknowledge."

Snape laughed now, also soundlessly, and without amusement. What other acknowledgment can I give? I paid my penance for that mistake, that choosing of Dark over Light. I carry his brand and will for the rest of my life, and I served Dumbledore's cause until I saw how corrupt he was in his turn.

But, of course, nothing would ever be enough to pay for his mistakes. Snape had known that when he saw the pity in Dumbledore's eyes each time he returned from a spying mission to report, when he saw McGonagall watching him, when he saw the way his students shied

away from him. It was the same as it had always been. Every time he reached out through the walls of bitterness, his hand was slapped away, and when he reacted with the defensive pride he had earned, then others accused him of unreasonable sarcasm or hatred.

That is not true, a voice that sounded suspiciously like Joseph's informed him. There is one exception. Harry.

Snape caught his breath, then nodded shortly. Yes, very well, Harry was not one who slapped his hand away. And Snape had decided to face the dreams in the first place because of Harry, and he had come to live in a house full of werewolves because of Harry.

And, at the moment, Harry had far more to worry about than Snape did. The Unspeakables were no enemy to disregard.

Snape stood, gathered up a cloak from the corner of the room, and went to the door. He had known almost at once that it was still deep night; his years as a Death Eater gave him a sensitivity to the hours. He was not likely to meet anyone as he walked the halls of Copley-by-the-Sea and thought, and that was exactly the way he liked it.

He stopped at Harry's room first, of course. He was one of the few people who did not have to worry about the wards on the door, because Harry had tuned them to Snape so that he could bypass every one of them. He opened the door and looked in carefully, forcing his eyes to see past the tricky shadows the moonlight through the open window wanted to impose on them.

Harry lay in a jumbled bundle in the middle of the bed that at first made no sense to Snape, until he realized that the bundle consisted of two boys coiled around each other. He snorted and eased the door shut. That occurrence had become more common than not of late. Draco spent almost every night in Harry's bed rather than his own. Snape supposed that he did not mind that. If Harry had a nightmare—or, Merlin forbid it, a vision—then Draco would know at once, and could wake him up. If someone tried to attack Harry while he slept, Draco would be there to fight for him.

Of course, if Draco pushed too far and did something that panicked Harry unforgivably instead of amusing him, then Snape had his vengeance carefully prepared. One month of uncontrollably and wetly sneezing and vomiting every time he became aroused should make Draco reconsider before doing that again.

Snape eased into the kitchen and lit the candle waiting on the counter with a flicker of his wand, then drew out a kettle from the kitchen cupboard and set about making tea. He made the Muggle motions automatically, though he used his magic to prepare it. When he noticed, he scowled and made himself stop performing them.

Once, he had believed that he belonged nowhere, because there was nowhere a halfblood could belong. Then he'd accepted his place in the magical world, and that meant he struggled to reject everything that was Muggle about him.

From what he could remember, Dumbledore had once considered sending the Potters to live under Fidelius in the Muggle world itself, once Harry and his brother were marked. Snape was grateful that he had not. To have a son who thought of himself as part of that world would be intolerable.

A light step behind him warned him. He whirled about, wand raised, and just barely managed to keep from casting the curse on his lips. Amber eyes gleamed in the moonlight through the kitchen window, and a growl throbbed in the throat of the woman standing behind him.

She stopped, with a shake of her head, once she recognized him. "Professor Snape," she said shortly.

Snape inclined his head coldly back to her, and held up the kettle. The woman nodded. "Yes, please," she said, and then sat down on the other side of the table, still watching warily. All the werewolves, Snape knew, could smell his jumpiness around them, and this one—

Well, this one had a keen nose, and another reason altogether to want to avoid his curses. Besides, she was a Muggle. She knew she had no defense against his wand, other than a werewolf's innate resistance to direct magic, and that meant nothing if Snape cut down

the roof and let it fall on her. Snape had observed the pack when they did not know he was observing them, and noticed those who had no magic automatically kept their subservience around the ones who did, unless they were mated. Harry seemed to think that the pack functioned smoothly together, without hierarchies except for the distinction between packmate and alpha. Snape knew better.

Power is always there, if one looks for it, he thought, and waited until the kettle began to sing before turning again to face this werewolf, a young woman who called herself Camellia. He was gratified to see that she had her arms folded. It made her look more like a sulky teenager, though he assumed she was in her early twenties, and less like the monster he had glimpsed looming ahead in the darkness in the spring of his sixth year.

“You have not yet told Harry?” he asked silkily as he poured the tea into two separate cups.

“He hasn’t made a comment,” said Camellia, watching the tea as if she wanted to be sure that he would put no potion into it. Snape concealed his amusement. If I wanted to do so, she would not see me do it. “I assume that he knows and just doesn’t want to cause discord. I mean, how could he not know?”

“By that alone, you prove that you do not truly understand him,” Snape said coldly as he levitated Camellia’s cup across the table to her, and sat down on the far side with his. “If he knew, he would come to us and try to reason matters out. And he would feel far more anger for my sake than yours.”

Camellia pulled her lips back from her teeth without a sound. As the moon turned towards the dark, that was less of a threat than it might have been if it were swelling, but it was a threat all the same. The whole pack could smell his fear, Snape knew.

He controlled that fear now, though. He knew that he had to, if he wanted to live and work in the same place that Harry was living. And the knowledge of the poisons—three separate ones now, not just the silvery one he had invented when he was brewing those months after

the attack outside Hogwarts—lying in his trunk upstairs was one of the major things enabling him to control it.

“You are the one who does not understand what an alpha means to his pack,” the girl said, spitefully. “It doesn’t matter that he’s not a werewolf. He’s ours. Ours to protect, to love, to be led by, to guard. And he’s sworn himself to be more than that. You will die if you touch him with hostile intent. I need no magic, not even the full moon, to kill.” She lifted one hand as though to remind Snape of her more-than-mortal strength.

Again the terror tried to cry in him, and if he let it, the cry would turn to a remembered howl, the howl blowing down the tunnel out of the Shrieking Shack in the moments before James Potter had come hurtling towards him, shouting his name...

But he was master of that fear. He had subdued it so well for years that even Harry had never sensed it. Snape weighted it and threw it into an Occlumency pool, and said, “What you have yet to understand is that Harry must share himself with far more people than your pack. He is not just yours, for he is owed debts and has responsibilities in every direction.”

Camellia showed her teeth again, but this time it was definitely in a smile. Snape watched in momentary confusion as she drank her tea, deliberately lapping it, and then put down the cup and stood.

“That is the place where you do not understand,” she said. “None of us expected Loki to return us equal love to the love we had for him. We were too many, for one thing, and his bonds to all of us were different. And he loved Gudrun more than he loved us. He fulfilled his obligation to the pack by giving us a new, highly protective alpha. We accept that.

“But Harry is that alpha now. We love him that way. It does not matter if he also frees house elves, if he loves his mate more than he loves us, if he sides with you. He is still ours by virtue of our love for him.”

She whirled and stalked out of the room, leaving Snape alone with his tea and his thoughts. He finished the first, carefully organized the second, and rose.

He did not think Harry had noticed yet that it was almost always Camellia who spoke with him, Camellia who took the lead when he planned something with the werewolves, Camellia who had detailed the way in which the werewolves would guard the festival being held two days from now and sniff over members of arriving packs. She was the highest-ranking of the pack after Loki, despite her lack of magic. She had power.

He was sure Harry had not noticed, did not remember, that it was Camellia who had seized his guardian that day by the lake and held him, her teeth pressed to his throat, while another of her companions seized Draco and a third went after Moody. If Harry knew, he would have reacted as Snape predicted he would, ironing out the problem. If nothing else, he would know now that he couldn't leave that animosity between Snape and Camellia simmering.

He did not yet know, and Camellia had not told him. She might be a werewolf, but she was no Slytherin.

Snape would keep the information silent until he could best use it. Rufus was working early that morning, before even Percy Weasley had arrived. He had not been able to sleep, and of course the Minister Flooing to the Ministry was not something that anyone would question.

He did question the knock on his door, until he realized how soft it was, almost ghostly. He should not have been able to hear it across the office, and yet he did. And neither of the Aurors standing guard outside had raised any alarms. It was the way that the Unspeakables had contacted him before, when his first allies from the Department of Mysteries, swearing to back him against Amelia, appeared.

He responded as they had told him to, closing his hand around his wand and tapping his fingers on it three times.

The door seemed to become misty, and then two gray-cloaked figures appeared, walking through it. Wilmot still did not raise the alarm, and his wards didn't react, either. Rufus nodded, reluctantly impressed. The artifacts the Department cared for, those things too dangerous or Dark or cursed to be allowed into wizarding society, permitted them to do many things that other wizards would misuse—once mastered. It was, Rufus thought, and not for the first time, a good thing that the Department of Mysteries was loyal to the Ministry.

“Minister,” said the first cloaked figure, the slightly taller one. His companion had taken a seat already; he bowed before taking one. His voice was calm and inflectionless. Rufus was sure he would not have been able to recognize it in a different context. “We bring you grave news.”

You hardly expected good news, Rufus reminded himself, and inclined his head shortly. “What is it?”

“We have a division in our own Department,” the Unspeakable said. “A few of our members think that our goals can best be met by aiding Amelia Bones. They have been feeding her information, and we believe that her sudden courage to pass new anti-werewolf laws and establish the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts may come from their backing.”

“That would make sense,” Rufus said slowly. In his last conversation with Amelia, he'd made a good deal of eye contact. Her own eyes were wide, graveyards where fear had gone to die, and she seemed constantly on the verge of telling him something. “She is, then, constrained to act against her will?”

“Not with artifacts,” said the calm voice. “With terror alone. But yes, we think so.”

Rufus leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. In the end, though, he had to shake his head. He simply knew too little about the Department of Mysteries to choose what the best course of action would be. But that was why he was lucky to have allies there, he knew. He could lean on their advice. The Unspeakables might rarely act in concert with other Departments, and then for motives as

mysterious as their titles, but ultimately, they were chosen for their loyalty to the wizarding world as a whole. They would despise someone like Cornelius Fudge, who had only been in the office for his own good, but they had approached Rufus. They appreciated him, Rufus knew.

“And you do not think we can stop this influence as of now?” he asked.

“No,” said the Unspeakable. “Until we know the reason our siblings think encouraging Madam Bones is an aid to our Department’s goals, we cannot act. Keep it as a stalemate for now, Minister. The weight of the situation must be the only thing that changes it. Knowledge is a precious commodity.”

I should have expected an Unspeakable to say that, Rufus thought, shaking his head again. The secondary purpose of the Department of Mysteries, besides making sure that wizarding society was cleared of anything intolerably dangerous, was to gain as much knowledge of those artifacts as they could, so they could be used to benefit wizards and witches when they were understood. Some of the greatest magical discoveries in the last two centuries had come from the Department of Mysteries. That an Unspeakable would counsel waiting until he had all the knowledge he needed was no surprise.

“There is one thing more,” the Unspeakable said. “I would hesitate to mention it, Minister, but we know you as a man of duty, who does the right thing even when it does not suit his own convenience.” He paused. “Alas, there are other people in the world who are not so dutiful.”

Rufus’s muscles tightened. He knew, somehow, what this was about, even before he asked for confirmation. “Harry?”

The Unspeakable’s hood moved in a shallow nod. “Yes. We approached him yesterday, when we realized that he had come to the Ministry and used magic in the offices of the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures.”

Rufus's hands clenched on the side of the desk. Would Harry have been able to resist the temptation, with the new anti-werewolf laws on the books? He knows what Department, other than the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts, is responsible for handling those laws. Amelia's pets only hunt. The Regulators take care of registered werewolves. "What did he use the magic to do?"

"Try to escape the notice of our wards, first of all," said the Unspeakable. "Then we felt his power flare. We are still not entirely sure what that meant, but we have noticed an unusual bustle of activity in one of the offices."

Rufus closed his eyes. He would not compel anyone. I could not believe that of him. But he did say the last time we met that while he hoped he would never have to use magic against anyone in the Ministry, he would do it now. Intimidating someone, as he did to Amelia? Clearing the way for a friend? Oh, yes, I can see it.

"Go on," he whispered, while his heart racked itself apart with bitterness for the necessities of war and revolution.

"We tried to talk to him, but he evaded us. We can only assume that he thought we were trying to hurt him, instead of have a private conversation. When we attempted to use one of our artifacts that would have established a privacy barrier, he swallowed the magic from it." The Unspeakable hesitated again, a minute pause hardly worth observing if all his other words had not come out so calm and steady. "We fear that he may consider our artifacts as sources of magic that would allow him to accomplish more and greater things."

Rufus swallowed. Harry drains magic from people with only the greatest reluctance. From objects? There were those stories of children whom Voldemort condemned to be Squibs in the attack on Hogwarts, whom Harry restored as wizards. He did that by draining Black magical artifacts.

But he's the heir of Black. What happens if he chooses to see the Department of Mysteries and its collections as acceptable prey, because they are not sentient?

Rufus could see him deciding that. And Harry was—well, not inclined to listen to advice, not all the time. Rufus could not see him deciding, now, to raid the Department of Mysteries and drain the artifacts there. But what if he decided, in the end, that it was the only way to make those he fought for safe? The anti-werewolf laws stood a good chance of getting worse, and before Harry would stand for werewolves being executed again or sent to prison, Rufus guessed, he would rise for them.

He remembered Harry's calm, stern face, and the magic that had flared around him. Harry had made his choice. He had used magic in the Ministry—Lord-level magic, against which ordinary wizards and witches didn't stand a chance.

And Rufus wanted the Ministry to be a place for ordinary wizards and witches, where they could get the help they needed and craved, and where the law, which was a tool that could work for anyone, not just those with enough power, was in effect.

It was, perhaps, a distant, foolish dream of his, the one that said, someday, the exceptions for Lords and Ladies that were built into wizarding law would be smoothed out. That everyone ordinary would learn not to live in fear of that powerful magic, that they would remember their numbers were as a great a force, in many ways, as that magic, and they would nod in approval as the last traces of a positively Dark Ages mindset were excised from the Ministry's records.

Harry had seemed to understand that, when Rufus warned him that he didn't want Lords mucking about in his Ministry. Dumbledore's magically compelled Order of the Phoenix had crossed the line. Harry using magic to aid his own supporters, if that was all he had done, did the same thing.

"I will have to contact Harry and tell him this," he said heavily, opening his eyes.

"He will probably write to you," the Unspeakable said softly. "Violent and—misunderstanding of our role as the former Mr. Potter seems to be, he is not dishonest."

Rufus nodded, appreciating that. It was true. Harry would probably realize their ways had parted already, assumed Rufus would find out somehow, from the Unspeakables or broken wards if nothing else, and know that all that remained was the formal apology.

“When he does, do not tell him of our role, though of course he may guess it,” the Unspeakable cautioned, rising to his feet. “We must understand the divisions in our Department first. And, of course, the price of our aid remains the same as always: if you tell anyone of it, it will stop coming.”

“I understand.” Rufus leaned back and regarded them with bleak eyes. “Thank you for telling me the truth, gentlemen. I could only wish that everyone’s loyalty to the Ministry was as great as your own.”

The Unspeakables gave short half-nods, half-bows, then went fuzzy and vanished. A moment later, Rufus heard Wilmot’s voice greeting Percy. Then the door opened and Percy entered the office, humming under his breath.

He stopped when he saw the expression on Rufus’s face. “Sir?” he said hesitantly.

“I have a new task for you, Percy,” Rufus said, trying to force his features into an expression of good humor. He could not allow himself to brood on this. He had known that his and Harry’s paths would most likely separate one day. Harry was not a Declared Lord, but no one with that level of magic ever remained outside politics for long.

And Rufus could not sacrifice his dreams, his people, his Ministry for one person, however complex, however good an ally or leader he would have made.

“What is it, sir?”

“You have a training sessions coming up soon, I believe,” said Rufus neutrally. “One in which you, as a junior Auror, are to observe one

Department in the Ministry and see how it smoothly functions from day to day.”

Percy blinked a bit. “Yes, sir.”

“Make sure it’s the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures,” Rufus said. “Harry has been there, and he may have left some—traces of magical activity, or unnaturally fast help for an ally of his.”

Percy’s face cleared with recognition—and with an unexpected sadness. Rufus was forced to realize, once again, that he was not the only person who had valued Harry highly. “Yes, sir,” Percy whispered, and then took his place at his usual desk, behind the thick privacy ward, in a thoughtful mood.

Rufus sat back in his chair and closed his eyes again. This seemed to be his morning for thinking.

Are we truly so different? Is there not something I could have done that would have made matters fall out for both of us? For that matter, is there some way that we can ally with each other even now?

But every road he turned in the maze led to a dead end. There was simply no way he could choose Harry over the Ministry. He was what he was: the Minister of wizarding Britain, responsible for the safety of many, not only a few, and not only those who had sworn oaths to him. There were hundreds of wizards who did things that Rufus disapproved of morally every day of his life. There were plenty in the Ministry, including Amelia, who had surrendered to fear. It was still his responsibility to see that criminals received a fair trial, that Departments went on functioning in spite of the fear, that the world spun on. He would do what he could for the werewolves, but he could not change his whole path to help them, as Harry had.

And while I am affected by Harry’s story, and while he has helped me, there is a reason I never become his full-fledged ally. He is a revolutionary; I am a reformer. There it is, at the bottom of it.

I wish him well, I always will, but we cannot walk side by side.

He sat up and shook his head. Perhaps things would look better once he had his morning cup of tea.

And perhaps not.

Harry had almost finished his letter to Lucius, and the one to Fred and George to ask if they could establish some line of communication to Percy, when an unfamiliar owl swooped through the window of Copley-by-the-Sea. He rose warily to his feet, especially when a pair entered a moment later, one flying to Connor, who was reading a book on Animagi on the other side of the room, and one to Draco, just glancing up from a letter to his mother. Since Peter had told him of Rosier's trick with the Snitch Portkey, Harry was paranoid about any letter that didn't come with Hedwig or one of the owls that the werewolves sent out.

Connor, though, had already opened his letter, and now he laughed—at the look on his brother's face, Harry assumed. "It's all right, Harry," he said, and waved the paper within around. "It's our OWL results!"

Harry blinked, then turned and accepted the parchment from the bird gently nudging at his shoulder. He scanned it for a moment, and then, in spite of himself, he began to laugh, too.

"I fail to see what is funny about one's OWL's," Snape remarked from the door. He never let Harry alone long now without checking up on him, as if he feared Harry would take belated offense from their conversation in Gollrish Y Thie and go to another of the Black houses. Or perhaps he's just avoiding the werewolves, Harry thought, as he grinned at his guardian.

"I got an Outstanding in the Divination practical," Harry said, and then began laughing all over again at the expression on Snape's face.

"How did that happen?" Connor demanded, sounding envious. "I was Poor at it!"

Harry shook his head. "Because I made up a load of bollocks, and the proctor accepted it." He returned to his parchment again. "That must be the reason I got Exceeds Expectations in the Astronomy theory portion, too. I can't remember enough of the bloody constellations."

"I can," Draco announced.

"Outstanding, right?" Harry asked him, and Draco nodded smugly. "Not my fault your mother's star-obsessed," Harry muttered, and went back to the parchment again.

"Outstanding in Potions, one would assume," Snape drawled, leaning against the doorway.

Harry smiled at him. "Both the theory and the practical."

He wondered if either Draco or Connor noticed the softening in Snape's eyes, or the tiny, tiny inclination of his head that he gave at that news. Harry felt a brief, flashing wave of pride lift him, as if he were a speck in a beam of sunshine.

It was replaced by a gnawing hunger. Sometimes, Harry's own yearning for a parent who acted like a parent surprised him. At least this time, he had expected it, and he could somewhat quell the hunger by telling himself sternly that Snape was proud of him and loved him. What more could he expect? It was better, far better, than the ultimately false love his mother and father had pretended to.

He distracted himself with the OWL results again. Outstanding in Defense Against the Dark Arts, both theory and practical—he would have been embarrassed to get anything less, especially with Acies as a professor last year. Exceeds Expectations in History of Magic. Whoever marked that must really have liked loads of bollocks. Exceeds Expectations in Charms, Acceptable in Transfiguration, probably because they'd made him use his bloody wand. The latter mark did worry him, though. If he hoped to become an Animagus, he needed to improve. At least he'd achieved Outstanding in the Charms theory portion and Exceeds Expectations on the Transfiguration exam.

Acceptable in Herbology, no surprise. Acceptable in Arithmancy, which he had no doubt Hermione had received an Outstanding in; he didn't have Hermione's head for numbers. Harry nodded. All right, then. He thought that was fine for someone with highly specialized knowledge, mostly wandless magic, and a Dark Lord after his head at the time, along with a battle he was planning for.

He started as he felt warmth drape around his neck, and then Argutus's head poked around his throat. "What did you receive?"

Harry shook his head. He had tried to explain to Argutus about OWL's before, and the Omen snake never understood, but that never kept him from asking. "Outstanding in all the subjects that matter," he told Argutus, floating the OWL results in the air beside him and scratching the serpent under the chin, "except Transfiguration, which is a problem. If I want to figure out how to become an Animagus, then I need to grow better at that."

He caught a glimpse of Snape staring fixedly at him from the corner of his eye. Harry frowned, though he made sure to keep it to himself. Why? It's not like he hasn't heard me speaking Parseltongue before.

"But you are going to be an Omen snake," Argutus said, sounding confused.

Harry blinked. "What?" He was actually fairly sure that his Animagus form, if he ever managed to achieve it, would be a lynx.

"Because I'm here, and I can show you how to manage it," said Argutus. "And because it's the only animal worth becoming, of course."

Harry chuckled and buried his face in the snake's scales. "I'm afraid it doesn't work that way," he said.

"So what way does it work?"

Harry began again to explain. At least there was the hope that Argutus might understand the Animagus form better than he understood OWL's, and Harry preferred arguing with his Omen snake

to any other form of argument. Argutus's presence had been a comfort yesterday, when he'd told Draco and Connor about the Unspeakable attack and had had to endure both oaths of vengeance and Draco looking at him gently, tenderly, all over, as if he might have an invisible wound somewhere.

And then Draco had ended up sleeping in bed with him last night, and insisting on some lazy morning snogging.

Harry glanced up and met his partner's eyes from across the room. Draco raised one eyebrow and smiled.

He did say he was going to push. But then Harry let that part of his thinking, along with his explanation about Animagi to Argutus, lapse, because Draco was mouthing something.

It looked like, "Just wait for the festival."

Harry frowned uneasily, wondering what that meant, until Argutus nudged him again and demanded, "But why can't you just convince your soul that it looks like an Omen snake? Maybe it will listen."

Lucius enjoyed owls interrupting him at breakfast no more than he did callers using the spell Charles Rosier-Henlin had invented. He therefore finished his tea before he accepted the letter, for all that he knew it was from Harry.

It seemed that Harry had wanted to go formal for this request—or perhaps he had wanted to see if someone were watching his post and if Lucius actually received the letter—or perhaps Draco had told him that Lucius preferred to accept letters. He felt a small smile widen across his face as he fed the snowy owl bits of bacon from his own plate. Such a treat, to be able to wonder about many possibilities with this Lord, rather than only one.

He opened the letter, and the ambush came.

Dear Lucius:

As Draco may have told you, I am currently exploring legal options available to the Black heir in my handling of the anti-werewolf laws. I went to a certain office in the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, which is now held by a man named Aurelius Flint, Marcus Flint's father. He seemed to know more than I would have given him credit for, especially because the old debt to the House of Black merely obliges the person working in that office to help; there's no reason he could have anticipated beforehand that I would choose that route or that I would want information about that particular problem. What do you know of Aurelius Flint? Is he a contact of yours in the Ministry? What are his political positions, his connections?

Thank you,

Harry.

Lucius put the letter down on the table and stared at it. The snowy owl hooted cheerfully, as if to say that any time he felt like writing a reply, she would carry it.

Lucius stared through her in turn. He was thinking.

He could see why Harry had not been afraid to trust this information to a letter. What he was doing was perfectly legal. That exception for the House of Black had been passed long ago, and anyone who wanted to look at the books would find it.

Aurelius Flint was the center of a vast network of favors owed and secrets possessed. Lucius knew him personally, and had done favors for him himself on several occasions. That, in and of itself, was something Harry could find out by asking someone else, and was not what had torn the ground out from under Lucius's feet to reveal the abyss hiding below.

No, there was the fact that Flint had worked through a network of favors that had resulted in Lucius being able to enter the Ministry undetected and torture the Potters. And he undoubtedly had the information, or could in a few hours' time, that would reveal that to Harry, even after Lucius had taken steps to have someone else,

former Auror Fiona Mallory, take the fall for his torture, and then put her into a coma when she was sacked.

If Harry discovered that Lucius had tortured his mother and father, Lucius's power and favored position with Harry would come to an end. He had no illusions about that. Justified vengeance or not, acting on pureblood traditions or not, claiming the debt for child abuse that Harry never would or not, Harry would feel compelled by his morals to turn his back on Lucius.

He reached into his robe pocket and drew out another letter, this one on a simple sheet of gray parchment, with the seal of an hourglass, black on gray. That had come last night, by no visible means; it had been under Lucius's door when he went to bed. The parchment said only, We are in conflict with the former Mr. Potter, over werewolves. You will know your danger shortly.

And now he did. The message was from the Department of Mysteries, which Lucius had contacted for the Dark artifact that had put Fiona Mallory into her trance—irreversible save for the help of that same artifact. If Harry was in conflict with the Unspeakables, that made a second outlet by which he could learn about what had happened, and who was responsible for felling Mallory, and why. Lucius could not say he understood the Unspeakables, any more than most ordinary wizards could. They might tell Harry the truth for their own reasons, or to end the conflict, or to distract him by throwing him someone he could save.

And Lucius with her, but as someone to damn.

If Lucius did not want to lose his power in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, he must move carefully. And the slight phrase “over werewolves” added to the Unspeakables' message had already given him an idea, even though he did not know why the Department of Mysteries would be interested in werewolves.

It could work. It could. But it would have to be done slowly, and secretly, and oh so carefully, because if Harry found out, Lucius was not sure that his claim on Harry's attention would be the only thing in tatters.

He had walked through barbed conflicts like this before—when unknown people within Hogwarts were threatening his son, and in his days among the Death Eaters. If, this time, he had more to lose, that did not mean that this walk was impossible, he told himself. He only had to watch for more thorns.

He would survive, and, more, he would thrive, secure his family's position closest to Harry's side, get rid of the danger, and bury his own past mistakes in one stroke.

Lucius relaxed enough to reach for more bacon and feed it to—Hedwig. A saint's name. A lovely owl, really.

He would achieve success where others would only see lurking failure.

It was what a Malfoy did.

Chapter Twelve: Harry's Festival

This time, Harry didn't get much more warning than a soft, gleeful laugh.

The talons that raked down his left shoulder sent him to his knees, gasping in pain. He turned about, his balance jolting as his weight transferred from his hand to his stump, and stared. The bird was hovering overhead, its clawed wings clapping steadily and its talons opening and closing.

You should know what I am now, it told him. And you should not have forgotten, you should never have forgotten, no. You are involved in too many battles, but one lies behind them all, and that is the battle that must be faced at the end, the true war, with your true enemy.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry growled, forcing the words out past the pain in his shoulder. The cold that crept across the cuts hurt, but in a few moments, they had gone numb. Harry glanced down, and restrained a grimace. At least the cuts weren't nearly as deep or severe as the ones the bird had inflicted on him in the Sanctuary.

Look in the mirror, the bird said, and laughed, and then lifted straight up towards the ceiling of the loo. It vanished through a spray of warm water, confirming Harry's idea further that it was a creature of pure magic. If it wasn't, then the warm water should have done some damage to a creature of ice.

Harry spent some time staring after it, then shook his head and stood, walking over to the mirror. Since he was in the loo, he should check.

The ice was already melting from the cut, defeated by the warm atmosphere of the shower. Harry stared, and for a long moment could make out no pattern. Then he twisted to the right, and realized that the wound could be seen as a lightning bolt made up of three separate lines.

And has every wound it's given me been a lightning bolt?

Mind preoccupied, he tried a healing spell, but of course it didn't work. None of his healing spells ever seemed to work on the wounds that the bird gave him, unless it was a minor effect like warming them or stopping the blood flow. He wrapped his towel around his waist and stepped back out into the bedroom.

Draco was awake, and watching him.

Harry told himself that it was ridiculous that his focus shifted almost at once from the cut on his shoulder to the fact that he was nearly naked in front of his boyfriend. Draco would probably like him to think that way, but he had the wound to deal with, and then the festival, which was today, required arrangements and preparation.

You're afraid, a voice that sounded far too much like Sylarana's told him.

Harry told it to shut up, and shifted so that his shoulder was to Draco. "That damn bird showed up in the loo again," he said.

Draco jumped up and came to his side at once, exclaiming softly as he tried to heal the cuts. He said nothing about their shape. Harry thought one had to be in the right position for that, and he was already thinking there was nothing to it. He knew some of his other cuts hadn't been shaped like lightning bolts, and why should he believe anything the bird said?

"And you don't know what this bird is, Harry, or why it's doing this?" Draco's fingers pressed into the skin under the wound, making Harry hiss. Draco murmured an apology, and tried Integro. This time, Harry could feel the skin closing over the cuts, and relaxed with a little sigh. They really were small compared to the massive amount of shredded skin and blood and pain the bird had seen fit to inflict on him last.

"No. My best guess is that there's a wizard imprisoned somewhere who's really angry at me, and his magic's grown a personality of its own and come to mark me. It would fit with the 'he' the bird talks about, and the fact that its personality reminds me of my magic's after it first escaped the phoenix web." Harry squinted at his shoulder. The last traces of pain, from both ice and blood, were leaving now. He

nodded his approval. "But without knowing who the wizard is, and with the bird appearing so suddenly and without warning, I don't know how to stop this."

"I don't like that Vera had no idea what it was, either," Draco muttered, running his hands down Harry's sides until they stopped at the towel, toying with it. Harry felt gooseflesh break out along his spine, but steadfastly ignored the touch, shrugging instead.

"Neither do I. But that's why I don't think I'll find the answer anytime soon. If the Seers in a magic-filled Sanctuary don't know what it is, then why should anyone else? At least I know that bird isn't the product of something broken or rotten in my own soul. I think they would have been able to See that."

Draco nodded. His mind appeared to be on something else now that the cuts were healed, and Harry suspected he knew what that something was. Determinedly concealing a shiver, he turned towards his trunk.

"Harry?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "What?"

"Why are you so nervous with my seeing you nearly naked?" Draco's face was calm, as though he were asking about an obscure point of plant lore, but the look in his eyes was anything but casual. Harry suppressed another shiver.

"Because I feel frightened," Harry said, deciding to be blunt. Draco blinked, his face losing some of the calm mask, and Harry nodded, never taking his eyes away. "It's not just the fact that I'm not clothed and you are—"

"In pyjamas," Draco murmured.

"That doesn't help," Harry said. "It also isn't just the fact that I know you wouldn't hurt me. It..." He shook his head, wondering if he knew how to say it. Or, rather, if he could bear to tell Draco the details. He was so tired of everything leading back to his training, and the

thought of talking about what he believed to be true of bedding made his cheeks heat up.

I do so much better when I know that I'm giving my time or attention to someone else, and don't demand anything in return, he thought miserably.

"Harry," Draco said. "We have to speak about this sooner or later. You're not nearly as uncomfortable with touching me as you used to be. Is this something new? Or an outgrowth of the same thing?"

"An outgrowth of the same thing." Harry decided that he had to explain, or he would probably never be able to get dressed. "Draco, I—I never expected to have a lover. At all. My mother told me that lovers are supposed to be equals and partners, and the most important people in the world to each other. It wouldn't be fair for me to take a lover or spouse when the most important person in my life was Connor, because it wouldn't be fair to them. They would be expecting, and deserving, my full attention, and it would go elsewhere. And I suppose I still believe that, at some level. Not about Connor, but about the war effort and the revolution effort." He folded his arms and leaned against his trunk, trying to ignore the fact that Draco was now looking at his chest as if he were—as if he were someone special and physically beautiful. Harry had to ignore this, or not only would he never get dressed, his explanation would never go anywhere. "I'm going to be vates. I will be all my life. I don't see how I can ever stop, and the task is going to take longer than my lifetime."

He met and held Draco's eyes. "And—I suppose I'm still worrying that if we become lovers, I won't be able to give you all the attention and time you deserve. I love you, Draco. You don't deserve scraps of attention, spare moments thrown your way whenever I'm not doing anything else."

Draco listened in silence. Harry thought he was thinking about it deeply, until he said, "Are you done?"

Harry blinked. "Yes."

“Good.” Draco moved a step forward, his expression calm and determined. “Harry. Listen to me. You never need to worry about this again. Your mother painted a picture of a lover who would never complain, I think, someone who would just leave without a word the moment he thought your attention was going elsewhere.” He nodded, as though in response to Harry’s expression. “You’re understanding now. I’m not like that. I’m not made for silent stoicism. I told you, I’m going to push. I’ll let you know, believe me, if I think that you’re neglecting me.”

“But—“

“Yes?”

“You deserve someone who can pay attention just to you.” Harry ran his hand through his hair. “I don’t understand why you don’t want that.”

“Because I’m not in competition with another person,” Draco said. “I’m confident that I’m more important to you than anyone else, Harry. As for being in competition with ideas—you’re not in love with them. And frankly, someone who only pays attention to me each and every moment of the day, and to nothing else, strikes me as madly obsessive, not as in love.”

Harry cocked his head. “So I’m worrying for nothing?”

“Yes.” Draco nodded at the cuts on his shoulder. “Just as I think I could have reassured you earlier if you had actually told me what the bird was and what it was doing. You still have a problem with keeping secrets, Harry. But this isn’t a problem.” His voice and face were both unearthly and calm. “Bedding each other isn’t going to change anything so fundamentally that you have to start paying attention to me and only me.”

Harry nodded slowly. He supposed he should have started questioning this earlier, in retrospect, but Lily had made the dream of lovers absolutely focused on each other sound so wonderful. She had made it sound as if she expected Connor’s future marriage or joining to be like that, and she had said that it was the relationship she and

James would have had if she hadn't needed to rear one son to save the world and the other to guard him.

"I should warn you," Draco went on, the tone in his voice signaling an obvious shift in subject, "that if you don't put on some clothes soon, I won't be responsible for what happens next."

Harry laughed and opened his trunk, the nervousness he'd felt around Draco for the last several days dissipating. So bedding would change some things, but not everything, and he could still love Draco that way and be vates.

He hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. Draco did say that I should ask questions I was wondering about, instead of always keeping them to myself.

"Can I know one thing?" he asked, as he pulled out a shirt and tugged it over his head.

"Of course," Draco said, his voice a little more normal now.

Harry peered at him over the collar of the shirt. "You keep looking at me with—" Come on, Harry, you can say this, you aren't a ten-year-old and you aren't just the boy your mother raised. "—desire in your eyes," he finished determinedly. "Does that mean something?"

"Besides the fact that I desire you and really want to fuck you when we're both ready?" Draco grinned at him. "Not really."

Harry did end up flushing after all, and turned to find pants and trousers. Draco laughed at him, and then went to the loo himself.

"So I should register everyone's wand as they come through the door?" Erica was patting at her dark blue robes, which one of the werewolves had lent her. She'd been frightened to go back to her flat once she saw the memories in Snape's Pensieve, convinced she would find it haunted by Unspeakables. Harry had read her mind with Legilimency, but found the Obliviate web there far different from the one he'd faced when he freed Remus's memory. He didn't want to dare try and touch it until he knew more about the artifact that had caused it.

“Right,” Harry told her. They stood near the front door of Silver-Mirror. Harry had chosen it as the most impressive of the Black houses, given all its treasures, including the sun-pool and the wind-pool and the pictures by Neptune Black, though he’d heavily warded the pools and the portraits beforehand so that no one could actually touch them without his permission. “When the guests begin arriving, just ask them for their wands. Everyone except some of the werewolves who were born Muggles should have one.”

Erica bobbed her head several times. Harry squeezed her hand, reassured her that she should do fine, and then moved away from the front door himself, through the hall lit by the gleaming fire-pool overhead. Golden drops crept down from the ceiling along lengthy chains that led to lamps, filled the lamps with rich light, and then departed back to the fire-pool overhead. Harry could see some of the werewolves who’d just arrived from Cobley-by-the-Sea, including Camellia, gaping at it. He smiled to himself, wondering what the rest of his guests would make of it.

He tripped over the hem of his robe then, and scowled. He’d ordered the robes from Madam Malkin’s with all the appropriate symbols proclaiming him heir of the House of Black, because if he was going to do this, then he was going to do this right. But, for whatever reason—maybe it was actually in the specifications for festival robes—Madam Malkin’s had made them incredibly thick. They swirled around in his feet in such heavy folds that they barely lifted out of the way in time when he tried to walk, and as for trying to stride, forget it.

Someone intoned a quick charm behind him, and his robes began floating gently around him, just enough not to be noticeable. Harry craned his neck back and saw Snape, in black robes slightly richer than what he normally wore, tucking his wand away.

“Thank you,” said Harry. “I needed that.”

Snape smiled thinly. Then his eyes darted to the door, and his mouth firmed into a thin line. Turning, Harry saw Remus just entering,

surrounded by other werewolves formerly of Loki's pack. He had the urge to tense up himself, but this was going to be a festival with guests in the low hundreds. He didn't have to talk to Remus if he didn't want to.

"Play nicely," he murmured to Snape.

"I play cleverly," Snape said, and then turned and swirled away into the mass of guests already there. Harry sighed and went to greet the rest of the pack.

Remus tried to catch his eye several times. Harry ignored him politely each time, and then Peter showed up to share tales that Regulus had told him about the house, and Harry excused himself gratefully.

More guests arrived. There were those who had already taken the oath to become part of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, of course, but there were also people who had spoken to him at the meeting on the spring equinox, and pureblood families Harry had invited because it was traditional and whom he suspected had accepted the invitations out of curiosity.

And there were the werewolf packs.

Harry found that he could tell the alphas at once, and he didn't think it was because Loki had given him the magical ability to do so; he had simply been around werewolves now, and he knew more about how the packs interacted. In a group of three or twenty of people with amber eyes and elongated teeth, he watched the way their heads swiveled, and the person they looked to, if only for a flickering moment, before they spoke, and how they tipped their bodies relative to that person. That usually let him locate the alpha.

Some of them were to be expected: a huge man taller than Loki had been and with a more commanding presence, a man with a torn face and a missing eye that said he'd often been involved in status fights, a witch with prematurely white hair who looked as if she never laughed. But others Harry would not have suspected if he hadn't learned to read the signs. A frankly tiny woman with very dark skin

and hands so soft that they felt as if she hadn't done a day's work in her life sniffed Harry's ears and then nodded to him.

"My name is Peregrine," she said, and Harry recognized the name of an alpha Camellia had told him he'd been lucky to get, since she violently distrusted most wizards and had escaped from Ministry officials trying to track down unregistered werewolves more than once.

"Welcome, Peregrine," Harry said, and the alpha seemed appeased by the respect in his voice. She showed her teeth in a half-smile, at least, before she led the pack members swirling around her over to one of the refreshment tables set up along the wall. Harry had taken care to send Rose and her mate after a good amount of meat as well as fruit and vegetables, bread and tea and cheese and wine.

There were so many guests there that Harry found he didn't have time for long, drawn-out conversations. He swirled among them, exchanging snippets of personal concerns with those he knew well, and finding a variety of polite topics to talk about with those he didn't. He knew eyes were on him. He wasn't worried. Narcissa herself had looked him over and pronounced him a Black heir her line would be proud of. Harry didn't think he had to take anyone else's opinion about that seriously.

Gradually, he did turn his steps towards the back of the room. He had a surprise waiting for many of his guests, in the form of a certain Pensieve and a Black artifact that reflected images.

Snape didn't try to prevent the pull of the crowd from leading him where it wanted him to go, but, on the other hand, when he did catch a glimpse of his prey, he moved in that direction. So, not long after the second half of Loki's pack arrived, he found himself standing behind him as he filled his plate from one of the refreshment tables. He appeared entirely unaware of any watchers. Snape savored that for a long moment, nursing his tea, before he spoke.

"Hello, Lupin."

Lupin started violently, and Snape had the pleasure of watching him struggle not to drop his plate. In the end, he set it down on the edge

of the table and then turned around, his eyes so wary that Snape could almost forget they were amber.

“Hello, Severus,” Lupin said, his voice formal and correct. “Did Harry send you to speak with me?” Hope tainted his voice, but Snape sneered, and the corresponding expression died off his face.

“No,” Snape said. “Why should Harry want to talk to you, Lupin? He said all he had to say to you the other day. He loves you still—” the words burned his tongue and lips like acid “—but he will never trust you again until you prove to him that you can be trusted.”

“And I don’t know to do that!” Lupin’s eyes shone with a gratifying desperation. “I know that he’s the alpha of the pack now, and I thought I could teach him about the ways of werewolves. But he’s kept his distance from me, and now I’ve found out that he thinks I’ve betrayed him.”

Snape had another pleasure then, that of being surprised into a laugh. “And you think you did not?” he asked, when he managed to recover. “Of course you did, Lupin. You never let him know that your allegiance had changed, that you considered yourself a werewolf to the exclusion of all else, even his surrogate godfather.” He watched Lupin wince under that accusation. “You abandoned him when you were his father’s friend, his brother’s godfather, the last of those who had both seen him grow up and whom he thought he could trust. You know so much about him. He is vulnerable to you. And you turned around and sold the information to Loki.”

“There was never any question of payment,” said Lupin stiffly. “It was a question of pack loyalty.”

“And you did not tell him about that, either.” Snape paused, watching Lupin through narrowed eyes. This was the reason that he did not quite believe Camellia when she said that, because Harry was their alpha, the pack loved him and would bite off the hands of anyone who looked at him sideways. Lupin was showing no sign of either kind of love he was supposed to bear Harry. “Why not, Lupin?”

“I knew that he would not understand.”

“So quick to judge,” Snape mused. “In a life where you should have learned the folly of that.”

Lupin flushed. Snape lifted his cup of tea to his lips to hide a smile. Really, Lupin was proving to be quite the entertainment. Delicately torturing the only living, free, traitorous Marauder was something Snape had known he would enjoy, but he had not foreseen how much.

“I understand now,” Lupin said suddenly. “It’s because of you, isn’t it? He’s been keeping his distance from me for your sake.”

“And thus,” Snape said, “we have the first evidence that lycanthropy can and will rot one’s brain when one bears the curse for longer than thirty years.”

“You bastard,” Lupin breathed. Snape couldn’t tell whether or not he’d heard him. “That’s it. You’re not afraid of werewolves, you’re afraid of me, and Harry thinks that he can’t listen to me because of that. When I joined the pack, you encouraged him to see it as a betrayal, because you’ve always thought of me that way, as a treacherous animal. Otherwise, he would have regarded it as a separation over principles. But you poisoned him against me.”

“I assure you, Lupin,” Snape said, his hand dropping so that it brushed the pocket where both his wand and a certain vial rested, “that whatever feelings I may harbor for your loathsome kind, I would not act against Harry in that way. As in so many things, I fear you are confusing me with yourself.”

Lupin showed his teeth. Snape controlled a shiver, but his scent must have changed, because Lupin’s eyes flared with triumph.

“You are afraid,” he said. “Of me. And you’re going to go and tell Harry that, that I didn’t betray him, but you encouraged him to think I did.”

“Lycanthropy rots the brain indeed,” said Snape. His hand slipped into his robe pocket and closed over the wand. “Harry made the

decision on his own. He came back from the Sanctuary no longer as inclined to forgive slights and insults and betrayals as he once was. You have not learned to deal with him in this new form, Lupin, so you blame me. But you have forgotten that ordinary wizards are shapeshifters in their minds and souls, when the impetus is great enough.”

Having delivered that dignified line, Snape turned to leave, but felt a hand close on his shoulder. He knew it was Lupin’s hand, and instinctively jerked away, spilling his tea. Though there was no evidence that a werewolf’s nails could spread infection in human form, the thought of one of the beasts touching him brought back too many memories.

Lupin spun him around, using that more-than-human strength Snape hated so much, and nudged him back a few steps until he hit the wall near one of the lamps. His mouth was open, just enough to give Snape a glimpse of fangs and gullet, and he was growling softly, under his breath.

“You are going to tell Harry the truth,” he said. “I want you to tell him the truth. You did something. There’s no reason that he would stay away from me otherwise. There’s no reason that I would find it so hard to accept him as alpha—“

“Let him go, Remus.”

The voice was cold, and steady, and so firm that Snape could not at once place it. He slid his eyes to the side, and saw Peter Pettigrew standing there, his wand poking unobtrusively out of the corner of his sleeve so as not to attract attention, his blue eyes fastened on his former friend.

Snape remembered Peter from the Death Eaters as well as his school days, of course, but he had had little contact with the man since his escape from Azkaban, and this Peter was neither the fat companion to bullies nor the cringing man who had fawned over Voldemort—and who, Snape reminded himself, had only been a shadow in any case, an act to convince Voldemort that Peter had joined him out of jealousy. Peter had had the courage and strength to

do what none of his friends did. Snape himself had not dreamed at the time that Peter's actions were other than what he saw they were.

Three of us, Snape thought now, Peter and Regulus and I, all working against Voldemort in secret for our own reasons, and we could not trust each other enough to tell the truth.

"Peter, you don't understand—" Lupin breathed.

"I understand that you haven't made any attempt to change at all," said Peter. "If you're having trouble accepting Harry as alpha, that's a matter to take up with him and the pack. If you're going to change your mind and come back to us, then you'll have to act like that, not just claim it's going to happen. You waver and waver, Remus, and your convictions are few." His lip curled, and he moved a step closer. "No wonder you and James got along so well."

Lupin let Snape go as if burned. "I never cooperated in Harry's abuse," he said defiantly. "I never knew about it, and then I found out, and then Dumbledore Obliviated me, and I feared my own anger, so I—"

"Excuses," Peter said, pacing up beside Snape as Lupin backed further away. He never took his eyes or his wand off the werewolf, but he nodded to Snape. "Are you all right, Severus?"

"I am," said Snape. He slid a sideways glance at Peter, wondering if it was only his words that had intimidated Lupin so.

Peter kept on watching, not moving, until Lupin dropped his eyes and moved away. Peter huffed out, a deep breath, and then shook his head. "He never truly apologizes," he remarked, as he tucked his wand back into his sleeve. "Excuses his own behavior, yes, and explains his convictions and his reasoning at length, but he hasn't said sorry. I think that's the first thing he has to do with Harry, and he just won't accept it. He's convinced himself that he's wronged for being a werewolf, and that all werewolves are wronged, and that apologies are for other people."

Snape cocked his head thoughtfully. If he had heard a better description of Lupin's behavior, he couldn't remember it. He thought Harry might have said the same thing, if he were clear-eyed enough to see Lupin for what he really was.

"What was the spell you were going to cast?" he asked.

Peter laughed softly. "The Flea Incantation."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "And that works even on a werewolf in human form?"

"Of course," said Peter. "The fleas can still sense that a werewolf's blood is richer and more to their liking than the average human's. And they're hard to get rid of, because they can't be spelled away." He blinked innocently. "Especially if one casts the spell every few days, so that they come back just as the victim thinks they're gone."

"I suppose that one could not learn this incantation?" Snape murmured.

Peter cocked his head. "An offer might be open, as long as there is a counter-offer of not using it enough to seriously annoy Harry."

Snape smirked, and moved off to a corner to practice. There may be something to be said for pranking.

"And I thought you should get to know each other."

Harry concealed a sigh. He really couldn't blame Connor. He hadn't spent as much time with his brother as he'd planned to do since Connor came to stay with him, and none at all with the person his brother wanted him to meet. But he could have wished that Connor had chosen to introduce his girlfriend to Harry after Harry had shown his allies the memory of the Unspeakables' attack.

As it was, Harry had to hold a polite expression on his face as he nodded to Parvati. "I'm glad to hear that you're dating Connor, Parvati." Though they didn't know each other that well, he thought

“Miss Patil” would have sounded even more awkward, and “Patil” rude. “He needs an anchor at his side, Merlin knows.”

Connor laughed. Parvati, who was wearing a heavy dark gown that showed off her long black hair and delicately pretty features, didn’t.

Connor glanced back and forth between them for a moment, and then smiled. “Things are probably strained with me here,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ll go get something to eat, and let you two talk in private.” He nodded, and bounded off through the crowd before Harry could stop him.

“I did have something that I wanted to say to you without him here, actually,” Parvati said, the moment he was gone.

Harry blinked, and took a moment to respond. He had assumed neither of them would say anything, other than perhaps, “So.” And that was all he managed after his moment was done. “So?”

Parvati folded her arms and nodded. Harry had rarely seen her when she wasn’t laughing, or fawning on Professor Trelawney in Divination. This way, though, she almost looked like a grown woman. “I don’t like the way that you’ve tended to take Connor’s help and give him nothing in return,” she told him.

“Help?” Harry hated to sound like an idiot, but he had no idea what she was talking about.

“I know it was his idea to tell everyone that you were the Boy-Who-Lived,” said Parvati seriously. “I’m not blaming you for that. And it’s true, anyway, so I can’t object.” She put her hands on her hips. “But you haven’t paid attention to him the way that you should pay attention to a brother. You barely spend any time with him. You ask for his help when it suits you, like changing the way he’s linked to Lux Aeterna, but you didn’t give him help. He’s only gone into battle while you fought once, and then he didn’t get to ride the second iron thestral with you. That was Malfoy.” Her curled lip told Harry what she thought of Draco. Well, there it was hard to blame her. She was Gryffindor, and from a Light pureblood family. “I know you aren’t a Lord, you keep proclaiming it, but there are ways that you act like it,

by having sworn companions. Why aren't you keeping Connor that close to your side? You act like he's not your brother at all, until it's convenient for you to remember."

"Connor's never asked me for that," said Harry. "I assumed he didn't want to cut a lightning bolt scar in his arm and swear himself to me."

"You assume too much," said Parvati softly. "He talks about you all the time. He loves you. And you don't seem to love him as much."

"I may not spend as much time with him, but we're in different Houses," said Harry, aware he sounded defensive. He didn't care. The suggestion that he didn't love Connor was too ridiculous for words. "Rival Houses, too. And he had no reason to go to the Sanctuary. And I do try to help him with dueling training and all that, and I—"

"It's just gone from one extreme to the other," said Parvati blithely, ignoring the way Harry stared at her. "You were obsessed with him until third year, and since then you've ignored him. You didn't even know we were dating. You were surprised he asked me to the Yule Ball. You didn't realize how nervous he was about the Tasks in the Triwizard Tournament. You barely talked to him at all last year, except when you wanted something. He loves you like a brother, and you treat him like a—an acquaintance." Parvati cocked her head. "He deserves more than that. He deserves better than that."

Harry heard Lily's words echoing in hers for a moment. Someone whom you love deserves all your time and attention, Harry.

"I've been a bit busy," Harry said stiffly.

"So busy you can't make time for your brother at all?" Parvati arched her eyebrows. "I find that hard to believe. Padma and I are in different Houses, too, and we make time for each other. We're twins. Sometimes I find it hard to believe that you and Connor are. He loves you more than you love him."

Harry felt a shard of doubt lodge in his heart and grow.

Is that true? I know that Draco and Snape are both more important to me than Connor is. But what if I'm the most important person in the world to him?

"I don't like seeing the boy I love being used," said Parvati. "If you keep doing it, then I'll do what I have to do. He'll get what he deserves. You might be a vates and a Lord and all the rest of it, but he's your brother. Make time for him. He wants it." She nodded firmly and turned away, just in time to welcome Connor as he came back through the crowd with a plate of food.

Harry watched for a moment, heart aching, but had to shake his head when Connor invited him to stay for just a little longer and talk to him and Parvati. Connor looked disappointed. Parvati shot Harry a look which said, clearer than any words could have, Do you see what I mean?

Harry turned away and went to the table with the Pensieve, brooding. It took him a moment before he could touch the Black artifact, a prism, and coax it into life. It shone with several rainbows, and made people all over the room turn their heads. By the time Harry cast the spell that would carry his voice to the ears of every guest, most of those people were paying attention to him.

"Good evening, and welcome to my festival to celebrate my sixteenth birthday and my becoming the legal heir of the Black line," Harry said formally. He could hear most of the conversations dying down. "I know it's traditional to receive gifts at such a time, but I prefer giving to receiving. Thus, I give you the gift of a warning. I do not ask that you act on this warning, only that you hear, and see, and remember."

He turned the prism so that it aimed at the Pensieve, and then moved the heavy silver bracelet around his wrist, the one that carried the Black crest and which he had to wear to make this artifact function, to the side of the prism. The rainbows narrowed into an intense cone of white light, and sprang into the Pensieve's silver liquid. Harry saw the figures in the memories dragged storming to the top of the basin, and then up, bursting into being over the heads of the watchers.

Numerous necks craned backward. If Harry's own experience was any indication, however, the angle didn't really matter. He was in the memory, watching as he appeared before the Unspeakable who'd tried trap him in the lift. Everyone who looked could see that it was a collar the Unspeakable was holding, and Harry could hear astonished murmurs.

The memory-Harry called for help, and Erica came running. From there, the fight proceeded as Harry had known it would. He heard gasps when he erased the hand of the Unspeakable reaching for Erica, and again when he used fire to consume the Still-Beetle shell and drained the magic from the globe the Unspeakable had thrown at him. By contrast, everyone was silent after the calm "Obliviate!" and Erica's complaint that she'd lost her memory.

Harry let the images fade, and the light from the prism flicker and die as well, before he spoke.

"I don't know what the Department of Mysteries wants," he told them bluntly. "I can tell you that it has something to do with werewolves. I was informed, by a source I trust, that they were the ones behind the new laws that werewolves must wear collars and carry identification wherever they go.

"They tried to capture me. In doing so, they declared themselves my enemies. I wonder now how many times they've done something like this, but Obliviated the witnesses and used their artifacts to cause chaos that blended into the stories they told their victims. What else do they have in their arsenal, beyond collars they think can hold a Lord-level wizard, glass globes imbued with the magic of time, and basins that can cast spells from a distance?

"I don't know. But I do know they operate in the shadows and within the guard of fear. The Ministry employees I talked to were terrified to speak their names.

"I have sworn not to let fear rule me. Those who try to make it rule other people are those I will try to stop. Be wary, but not afraid. Their greatest weapon is secrecy and hiding and the unknown. If we expose them, they will have nowhere to hide. If we bring their artifacts

up into the light of day and learn to understand them, then they are no longer unknown.

“My alliance is the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, but the Shadow part of the name only expresses our welcome to those who practice Dark magic. It has nothing to do with the shadows the Unspeakables cast. Those shadows, I will tear down, and make fade before the Light.”

He inclined his head in a bow, then moved away from the table and back into the crowd. Instantly, there was a stir of people wanting to speak to him. Harry wasn't surprised, and waited patiently for the first to approach him.

Strangely, it was a wizard Harry didn't think he'd met yet, clad in robes so rich that Harry suspected he was a pureblood. His hair was long and silver, and his eyes vivid dark green. He carried a feather in one hand, and Harry eyed it, wondering if someone had decided to give him gifts for his festival after all.

“Harry vates,” the wizard said, in a deep voice that made Harry want to hear him sing. “I came to offer you this feather, as a token of myself.” Solemnly, he held it out. Harry took it. His power had already told him that it had no magic, that it really was a mere token. “My Animagus form, you see, is a sea eagle.”

Harry blinked. He had studied the list of registered Animagi in Great Britain, and none of them was a sea eagle. But why would an unregistered Animagus reveal himself like this? “Who are you, sir?”

“My name is Falco Parkinson.”

Harry's eyes narrowed. “I read about you,” he said. “You were Albus Dumbledore's tutor, the one who told him he couldn't be vates without sacrificing his magic. Then you were Hogwarts Headmaster for a year, and then you died.”

Falco smiled mildly, his eyes growing sharper. “So many people believed that,” he murmured. “But when one walks between Light and Dark, one may fool people with competent illusions and glours, and playing to what they want to believe.”

He must have removed a barrier on his magic, though it wasn't one that Harry had felt. In an instant, his power blazed throughout Silver-Mirror. Harry stared at him. It was Lord-level, and reminded Harry of a wind come from the sea, bearing a scent of flowers.

"I was Albus Dumbledore's tutor," Falco agreed. "I was the one who taught him about balance and sacrifice, although I did not foresee the warped way he would pass those ethics onto you. Then I left the world for fifty years to wander the paths of Dark and Light, because I thought Albus had matters well in hand." Harry shivered for a moment; he remembered those paths, or half-remembered them. The wild Dark had shown them to him for a moment on Midwinter. They were not something a mortal wizard had any business knowing. "When I came back, I learned what had happened, and I studied you and Voldemort in silence for a time. Now I am convinced that you will destroy the wizarding world in your flailing, unless someone does manage to show you a proper balance." Falco stared at him calmly. "You would be best-advised to Declare. Then I can be your mentor, and not your enemy."

Harry wanted to laugh. He wanted to. That Falco could have observed him and yet come to the conclusion that Harry would Declare just to avoid conflict with him was absurd.

But he was remembering a prophecy that might come true three times, and that concerned a Dark Lord each time, and had so far only felled one.

"What is your allegiance?" he demanded.

Falco nodded, as though he approved of the question. "I have none. I have spent a long time between Light and Dark, convincing them both that I might someday Declare for one of them if they could show me enough magic to convince me. Neither has, as yet. I have remained alive for centuries in the same way. They preserve my life in hopes that I might Declare."

"Then why do you think I need to Declare?" Harry asked. "You haven't done it yourself."

Falco looked mildly startled. "My power grew with my age, and by the time I arrived at its full extent, I knew the nature of the wizarding world," he said. "The growth of yours is unnatural, and you are just a child. A Declaration would give you a path to follow, oaths to obey. At the moment, you do little but strike at the foundation of our world while giving nothing back."

Harry thought it was an argument he could have believed, as recently as two years ago. But he had done his own share of thinking about ethics and sacrifices since then, and if there was one thing he had learned, it was that making the same choice and sticking to it in every situation was not for him. It had been the right choice to go with Evan Rosier due to his "persuasion" and try to save the children of Durmstrang. It would have been the wrong decision to give in to Voldemort and sacrifice his life to doom all the children in Hogwarts.

Besides, nothing is that simple. I am not meant for the easy path.

"I live day by day," he told Falco. "I live while other things are going on. It sounds as if you want me to become a Dark Lord or Light Lord first and foremost."

"That is what Declaring means." Falco looked impatient now. "Will you Declare or not? You should. Those with Lord-level power must not go unchecked. Your magic is the most important thing about you." He nodded to the feather in Harry's hand. "I give you that as a gift, so that you can set wards against me spying on you in my sea eagle form. But I will be also helping Voldemort if you do not Declare, to preserve the balance of Light and Dark. Would you rather have me as mentor or enemy?"

"Neither," said Harry coolly. "I walked that path once, with Dumbledore, and I know how it ends." He curled his hand around the feather. "I will not Declare."

"Enemy, then," said Falco, and his arms melted into wings, and he rose, and swirled out of the room while people were still gasping and staring. No one had tried to approach them, Harry noticed. Falco had probably set a ward to insure that they couldn't. Now Draco came

running towards him, his wand drawn and his face pale save for two bright spots of color on his cheeks.

“Was that Dumbledore’s ghost?” he demanded, as he curled his arm around Harry’s waist and pulled him towards him.

“No,” said Harry, leaning against him. “Falco Parkinson. A man I thought was dead, but a living Lord-level wizard who’s going to oppose me.”

“Why did he reveal himself to you, if you had no idea he was still living?” Draco asked in bewilderment.

“Something to do with balance, likely.” Harry looked again at the sea eagle feather, but still it didn’t grow any magic or change form in his hand. He shook his head. “Just another enemy for me to fight.”

Draco snarled low in his throat. “For us to fight,” he said. “And this was supposed to be more dramatic and take place later, but for now, I don’t care.” He tugged Harry’s head back and kissed him fiercely.

Harry kissed back, hearing more gasps and several low, interested comments. He fought for and won control of the kiss for a moment, but Draco put up a good struggle. Harry drew away before his head could cloud too much, and gave a grim smile at the staring crowd.

“For those who don’t know, we are going to be joined,” he said. “This is my future partner, Draco Malfoy.”

Draco lifted his head haughtily, letting everyone get a good long look at him. Harry smiled at him, knowing his lips were swollen and not caring. He knew that some of the strangers in the room were staring at him, and he didn’t care. He knew that Snape was rapidly making his way to his side, snarling threats under his breath, and he didn’t care.

Two years ago, Falco might have convinced him. A year ago, he would have driven Harry frantic with worry. Now, all he did was get his blood up.

When are my enemies going to learn that they can't make me afraid?

Chapter Thirteen: Lessons, Bloody Lessons

Harry shifted so that the book on druidic magic settled more comfortably into his lap. Another problem with not having two hands, he reflected, was that the Levitation Charm made it difficult for him to hold heavy books steady; it always seemed to hover the left side of the book just above where he gripped with his right hand. He muttered under his breath and shifted again, then went still when he heard a snort from Draco.

Draco was actually sharing the bed with him and had fallen asleep, which Harry thought was a good sign of how much the festival had wearied him. It was before midnight, so Harry had felt justified in leaving the candles burning whilst he read. But if he woke Draco up now, he wouldn't feel it was worth it.

He waited, but Draco just turned restlessly away and buried his face in the pillows again. Harry huffed out a sigh and went back to the book.

It actually had several different definitions of place magic, which made it more interesting and useful than most of the books Harry had tried to read on the subject so far.

The oldest definition of a druid's magic is the magic bound to a place where a human has lived for years, or where the particular druid's family has lived for centuries. A magical place has time to grow used to humans when they dwell there for this long. Place magic is, in general, slow-moving, and slow to take notice of those creatures who are in motion. That is why its greatest emblems are trees, hills, and stones, those slow-aging, still giants of the world. Though a river may run through a magical place, and other humans may live there, it means nothing if the river's course frequently shifts or the other humans often depart. The place magic must first notice a human living in it, and then wrap itself around the human—come to consider him or her as part of what latter researchers have called the “matrix.” In older writings, this is often referred to as the “current.”

Harry thought of the current of magic traveling Woodhouse. It had not seemed to notice the humans who poured into the valley for the

spring equinox meeting—any of them. But it had noticed when they tried to move stones out of the sides of the valley, and had promptly put them back where they were supposed to belong. He wondered why the Antipodean Opaleye had proved the exception able to move the stones. She was also a moving creature, and hadn't been in Woodhouse long enough for the valley to have adapted to her.

He went back to reading.

Some have argued that this cannot be the only way a place's magic exists, because some druids did travel about, and were connected to many different places, not only one. Though research on this subject is uncertain—we understandably know less about druids who moved frequently than those who lived in the same home for years and left their writings behind—there is a good chance that these druids had already established themselves in one place and persuaded its magic to wrap around them. Then they chose a certain circuit of places that they traveled, usually a circular or vaguely circular path. Essentially, they created a second magical place, one bounded not by hills in the manner of a valley or the sea in the manner of an island, but by their travels. They persuaded the current that had wrapped them in the first place to extend outside its original home and wrap this new circuit. The great principle of place magic is its wholeness. The druids who became linked to their new homes were not conquerors. They had to submit to becoming part of something greater than themselves, a small blade of grass in the great lawn.

Harry gnawed his lip. He knew that some of the Opallines who studied druidic magic worked that way; Paton had told him. They lived for years in certain isolated valleys like Woodhouse, or made their homes into magical places with old techniques.

But he did not have time to either live in one place for that long, or create place magic by traveling in a circuit.

He turned another page.

Understandably, some wizards have wanted to take advantage of place magic without binding themselves to one place. They may build rooms that mimic both the limitations of place magic—namely, that its

power cannot be moved outside its boundaries—and its benefits—namely, that magic concentrated in one area is enormously powerful, and may develop a sentience of its own, as all magic tends to do when put under confinement for long enough. There are several rooms in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry that take advantage of this principle. They will provide secure rooms to train or see the future, but one cannot train or see the future with impunity in any room in the school. The Founders, in their wisdom, realized that Hogwarts itself could not be filled with place magic. Too many people travel through it every year, and the majority of those are young wizards, still in the throes of growing. There is too much motion for place magic to sustain.

This may be the place to indulge ourselves in a digression. Despite many attempts to argue that place magic is neutral—as some of the druids were rumored to have practiced Dark rituals and blood magic—in the modern practice, and in those older examples, such as the rooms at Hogwarts, that survive to the present day, it tends and turns towards the Light. Place magic is deeply ordered, deeply calm, and the personalities and sentience its bound magic creates tend to be intelligent and calm as well, not raging beasts. Under the old definitions of Dark and Light magic, place magic is Light because it is tame, not wild.

Harry nodded. That would be why the Antipodean Opaleye could do as she liked, then. Dragons are the wildest creatures of the Dark. Woodhouse probably couldn't even feel her, or she was strong enough to oppose its tameness.

He read a bit more, but though the book discussed some of the ways that one might build a room like the Room of Requirement, and speculations on how places that were not obvious candidates for druids' dwellings had been made into them, there was little that sounded as if it would help him present himself to the magic of Woodhouse. He was about to close the book when a passage at the end of the chapter caught his attention.

Finally, there is a little-practiced technique that may help the possessor of a magical place in bringing himself to its notice. Researchers have argued that in some places, the magical current is

so strong that a druid could not have made a stone or wooden house for shelter from the elements without first introducing himself. The magic would have put the trees and stones back into their places, and not troubled to notice him. Yet the first thing a druid often did when moving into a magically powerful place was to build such a house.

This argues for a method of introducing himself suddenly, and later dwelling in the place to confirm the bond, not create it. And, indeed, in the oral records supposedly transferred from the druids and written down centuries later, rumors of such a method exist. “Entering the dream” is its common name. What it might have consisted of is not known, but is of intense interest to those modern witches and wizards attempting to revive druidic practices.

Thoughtfully, Harry closed the book and laid it aside. So now he had another phrase to look for. Or perhaps he could ask Hermione to look it up for him. She’d already written him a list of twenty-four ways the new Ministry laws on werewolves violated precedent, and wanted something else to do. The wound she’d taken from Rosier’s Severing Curse in the Battle of Hogwarts still limited her ability to move around, and she’d finished her summer homework already, of course.

Harry blew out the candle and then lay down. Draco immediately rolled over and buried his head in Harry’s shoulder, with a muffled snort. He didn’t wake, though.

Harry stroked his hair. Then he shut his eyes, and told himself he was going to sleep, and not worry about things. He needed to rest.

Besides, he’d already created a schedule of lessons he had to study in the next few weeks until Hogwarts began again, and things he had to do—especially spending time with Connor. Parvati’s words had stung him deeply. He hadn’t been the brother that he could have been, and certainly he couldn’t delegate this task to anyone else the way that he could some of his research and spying. He would go and be the brother that he should have been.

“You do have to concentrate.” Peter’s voice was light and soft, but Harry could still tell that he was trying desperately not to laugh. “Think about what you know about yourself. You have to—”

"I've been doing that all morning," Draco snapped, opening his eyes again and glaring at Peter. "And I still don't know what my Animagus form is going to be. How should I know what the traits that are going to make me into an animal are? You're a rat, but not everything about you points to that."

"You might start by considering that you're an insufferable brat," Connor said from his corner. "It takes longer than just a morning, Malfoy, you knew that."

Harry sighed as Draco turned to yell at Connor again. He had thought that this would work because Peter could instruct all three of them—Draco had insisted on joining in—on how to become an Animagus at the same time. So far, though, Draco had whined and fussed, and Connor, who had been at this longer and actually wanted to hear what Peter had to say, had retaliated whenever Draco upset him too much, and Peter either shook his head or bit his lip to conceal his chuckles.

"Draco," Harry said. Draco was instantly focused on him, with an intensity that Harry found rather disturbing. He cleared his throat and shook his head. "Connor is right about this. You can't do well at it immediately just because you got an Outstanding in the Transfiguration theory portion of your OWLs. It takes a long time."

"Three years," Peter confirmed calmly. "That was how long it took us. But we didn't have an instructor—we certainly couldn't tell Professor McGonagall what we were doing, because she would have asked why we were doing it—and we made mistakes because we didn't know what some of the books we could find referred to. I plan not to let any of you make those same mistakes." He cocked his head and sat down on top of the desk in the front of the room. This had once been a study in Copley-by-the-Sea, and though the bookshelves were empty now, it still looked the part. The three boys were sitting on the floor in front of him. "If you can't accept that this will take a long time, Draco, then you shouldn't try this. Envisioning your animal form is only the first step, and Connor's right, it does take weeks."

Connor looked smug. Draco sulked. Harry sighed and leaned across the distance between them, clasping Draco's hand.

"Why do you want to become an Animagus, Draco?" Harry asked him quietly. "Think about that."

"Because I want to be at your side when I can," Draco snarled back, not quite keeping his voice down. "And I'm better at Transfiguration than you are. This shouldn't be a problem for me."

"There's a reason I'm not teaching Transfiguration, you know," Peter remarked to no one in particular. "I'm good at the Animagus transformation, and I know how to train someone else in it, but that isn't the same thing as knowing all about the theory of Transfiguring objects, or other people. And someone who's good at theory shouldn't expect to be an expert Animagus the first time out, either."

Harry thought that would make Draco explode again, but, perhaps because it came from Peter instead of Connor, it just made Draco bite his lip. Then he nodded his head reluctantly. "I suppose I can see that," he muttered.

"So let's start again," said Connor, bouncing in place. "I know that I was getting a vision when Malfoy interrupted." He blithely ignored Draco's glare.

"What was it of?" Peter asked intently, leaning forward.

"Something four-legged," said Connor confidently. "And medium-sized, and it definitely had hair. So, a mammal, but there are lots of medium-sized mammals with four legs and hair." He wriggled. Harry smiled. He's passed through everything relatively unscarred. I wonder how he did it. "I want to go back and look for it again."

"And there was nothing else?" Peter asked intently. "No silhouette?"

"The silhouette was forming when Malfoy interrupted me," said Connor, and sent Draco a superior look.

Draco opened his mouth, but Harry squeezed his hand, murmuring, "Show him you're the better person," and Draco shut it again and looked away.

"That's good progress, Connor," Peter said warmly. "But even once you have the silhouette, it can take weeks or months to fill it in. James got stuck on the silhouette for weeks."

Connor blinked. "How could he? It was a stag. That's pretty distinctive."

Peter shrugged. "He thought the antlers were horns, and he spent all his time trying to make them form horns instead of antlers. This process is fraught with peril, from your own preconceptions if nothing else. As I said, it took me a long time to accept being a rat. It took Sirius a long time to accept that he was a black dog rather than a paler one, simply because he thought the reference to his family name was too obvious. So try to see and accept what's truly there, not what you think is there, or what you want to be there."

Connor nodded and shut his eyes again. Harry nudged Draco's ribs with his elbow, and Draco sighed and shut his eyes. Harry half-lidded his own eyes, which made a better concentration tool for him than shutting them completely; when he did, he was too apt to start thinking about everything he had to do, rather than just his Animagus lessons.

He was fairly sure his form would be a lynx, but that could have been because he'd had that form in his visions with Voldemort. Peter had warned him that being certain one already knew one's form could be the biggest single block to envisioning it. Harry tried to think about why he wouldn't be a lynx, but his mind kept returning to it.

Why was I one in the first place? I retreated into that form as if it would protect me during the visions—and it did, keeping me out of the way and in the darkness. But why that form? Why not another kind of cat? Why not a bird, with wings that would fly me out of danger? There has to be a reason why it was a lynx.

His mind wandered, brushing over the traits that the lynx was graced with in legends and stories. Harry remembered ideas of lynxes being keen-eyed, graceful, beautiful, the cleverest of the cats. He smiled faintly. He would like to imagine that he was that way, but he had made his share of stupid decisions, and he had missed truths that lurked under his nose before.

Will I do that again? Does it matter whether you're a different person at one point in your life than at another? Was a lynx my destined form two years ago, and would it be something else now?

Harry was tempted to reject the notion, simply because Peter had remained a rat all his life, and James a stag long past the point when Harry would have said any nobility or pride was gone from him. But he didn't know enough about the process of becoming an Animagus to say that for certain.

Something else to ask Peter.

Eventually, Peter told them to open their eyes and discontinue the meditation. Then he told Connor to go read about four-legged mammals. Connor nodded with an enthusiasm Harry couldn't remember him exhibiting for any subject other than Quidditch.

On the other hand, do I actually know what he might like studying? I'm not in half his classes with him, and he chose to take Care of Magical Creatures. And that's another of those things we haven't talked about.

When Harry considered it, he was appalled by how little he knew about his own brother, and not just the things that Parvati had listed. He watched Connor leave the room, and felt a throb of longing travel through him. He wanted to talk to him, and not because Parvati had suggested it. He wanted to do it simply because he wanted to.

But he couldn't do it right now, because he had something to talk to Peter about as long as he was in the same room with him. He uttered a little sigh and turned back to Peter, even though Draco was hovering near the door, obviously eager to escape.

“Peter?”

Peter glanced up. “Yes?”

“This is an odd thing to ask you about, but you’re the only one left who knew our parents and whose word I would trust right now,” said Harry. Remus’s name hung, heavy and unspoken, between them. Peter nodded and laid down the book he’d started to pick up. “I think the prophecy that caused Voldemort to mark us might be coming true more than once.” Again Peter nodded; Harry had told him about that speculation when he came to Hogwarts to help prepare for the Midsummer battle. Since Peter had been a sacrifice because of the original prophecy, it seemed only fair he should know about Trelawney’s third one. “But I don’t know if it fits Dumbledore in all the particulars. I know that Lily and James defied Voldemort three times in the First War, and that was the reason Dumbledore thought their sons could fit the prophecy. But did my parents defy Dumbledore three times? Could he actually be the first Dark Lord in the prophecy?”

Peter narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “I’ll have to think on it a bit, Harry. I don’t remember all the times that might count. But my instinct is to say that yes, they did. And one time was during their seventh year.”

Harry cocked his head. “What happened?” Lily hadn’t mentioned this—but then, she’d wanted Harry to love and follow Dumbledore, not disobey him. If she had ever turned on him, then that might have lessened her credibility in her son’s eyes.

Lily was very careful with me. Harry suffered a stab of anger as he thought about that. Too careful.

“Most of the older Gryffindor students knew we were going to be soldiers in the War,” Peter began, leaning back on the desk. Harry heard Draco huff in impatience behind him. He ignored that. This was history he had never known, and which could be vitally important for defeating Voldemort and whoever the third Dark Lord in the prophecy would turn out to be. “Albus asked us, and we loved him and looked up to him, and he trained us himself. So we said yes. But James

suffered a brief rebellious streak during our seventh year. I think it had something to do with his parents, your grandparents, dying in the summer before seventh year, and James becoming a Potter in his own right. They were old even for wizards when they had him; they'd almost given up hope of a child. So their deaths were natural, but they reminded James that he might have his own not-so-natural death in a few months or a year.

"He decided there were more important things than the war in the world. He made plans to go off and live on his own, outside Albus's influence." Peter shook his head. "I only heard about this afterwards, so I never knew how defined his plans actually were—whether he was going to flee to France the way so many of the older students in other Houses did, for example. But he wanted to go. And since he was an illegal Animagus, and Albus didn't know about it at the time, he even could have kept out of his way for a good long time. None of us would have betrayed him, certainly.

"The problem was, he wanted Lily to go with him, and he knew she was more devoted to Albus than he was. So he kept putting it off and putting it off, until one night when—" Peter broke off, looking embarrassed.

"They had sex, didn't they," said Harry, and shook his head when Peter flushed more deeply. "It's all right, Peter. I don't like to think about my parents having sex, but I knew it had to have happened at least once." Harry gestured at himself.

Peter nodded. "So he persuaded her. They ran away. They left on a Friday night, and were gone for most of a weekend, so not that many people noticed at first. It was actually a Quidditch practice that made people realize James was missing, not just sulking somewhere because he'd had a fight with Lily.

"So Albus was prepared to go looking for them. But then they came back before he could. They were shamefaced, but James never wavered again. I have no idea what Lily said to him, only that it was her idea to come back."

Of course it was, Harry thought. He knew that Dumbledore had begun "instructing" Lily in her third year. By the time she reached her seventh, she would have been tangled up in chains of sacrifice, and not even the influence of the boy she loved would have stopped her for long.

"But why did you know so little about it?" Draco sounded curious himself now, if reluctantly so. "If none of you would ever have betrayed him, then why didn't he tell you about it?"

Harry looked up in time to surprise an incredibly bitter smile at the corners of Peter's mouth. He tried to smooth it away, but it was there, and Harry winced as he remembered the way the other Marauders had treated Peter. His devotion was never repaid with devotion.

"Oh, Sirius and Remus knew," said Peter. He was spinning his wand in his fingers, his voice cool and reflective, with barely a glint of the emotion, akin to hatred, that Harry knew waited like black water under the surface. "But they didn't tell me. They were still dealing with my Animagus form, and all its implications. Thought I would rat them out, apparently." A blue spark leaped from his wand and earthed itself harmlessly in the carpet.

Then Peter mastered himself. Harry saw him shake his head and stop spinning his wand. When he next looked up, his face was probably as calm as he pretended it was, or at least he wore a better mask. "To be fair to them," he said, "at that point I was still changing from the horrible person I'd been in fifth and sixth years to someone better. So while I wouldn't have betrayed them, they didn't know that. They didn't know what to make of me. I was changing, and they didn't know why."

"Why did you change?" Draco demanded.

Peter just shrugged, and this time, Harry thought, his smile was like a wall. "Many reasons."

Harry recognized the end of the conversation, even though Draco seemed like he wanted to ask more questions, and dragged Draco out of the room. He went, grumbling. "Sometimes I don't know what

to say to him,” he told Harry, as they turned a corner in the direction of one of the libraries. “He doesn’t seem like a man who spent twelve years in Azkaban, and then he’ll do something that reminds me.”

I wonder just how much of that man is there, and we just aren’t seeing him, Harry thought.

“So, are you going to talk, or are you going to do it?” Draco lay in the middle of Harry’s bed, hands folded beneath his chin and a lazy, self-satisfied grin on his face.

“I’m going to do it.” Harry glared at him for a moment, then turned back to Argutus. The Omen snake held steady, coiled around his left arm, his scales faithfully reflecting Harry’s left wrist, and the dark shimmer of magic above it. Harry knew now that this was a Permanence curse, meant to prevent him from being able to attach a limb of any kind of flesh to his stump, and after some time searching among the books, he’d found a counter to it.

He stretched out his hand above it, took a deep breath, and murmured, “Pausa iam.”

The black shimmer in Argutus’s scales grew bigger, spreading like a sunburst. Harry held still, even when a burning, itching, tingling sensation spread throughout his stump. The book he’d found the countercurse in had emphasized the importance of holding still, lest the magic should gain an even deeper hold as it was dragged off the end of his limb.

The spell gave a final spit and snarl, and then vanished in a small implosion. Harry shuddered at the pain racing down his arm, but it faded. He sat back and looked at Draco with a raised eyebrow.

“That’s the second one,” he said quietly. He’d removed the first curse in the Sanctuary. “Two more, one big one, and I should be able to have a second hand.” He stroked Argutus’s head in thanks, and the Omen snake unfolded and slid away from him, slipping out the door. Harry suspected he was going to sun himself on the cliffs. Copley-by-the-Sea’s windows were so scattered that any sunlight usually moved on too quickly for Argutus.

“That’s wonderful,” Draco breathed, and then looked a bit abashed. “Not to say that you’re not handsome with only one hand, Harry, that’s perfectly true. But for you to have two hands again, when Bellatrix and Voldemort tried so hard to insure that you wouldn’t—”

“Or just wanted me to despair,” Harry muttered, standing up and stretching. “I don’t think Voldemort ever planned for me to survive the graveyard.”

Draco snorted and rolled over. “So he’s an idiot. We knew that—where are you going?” he added sharply, as Harry headed for the door.

Harry glanced back at him, startled. “To spend time with Connor. I told you I was thinking about that.”

Draco scowled and dug in his robe pocket. Harry watched, not understanding, until Draco pulled out a wooden coin and threw it at him. Harry caught it automatically and looked down. It was the coin the assassins in the Ministry had thrown at him, marked with a winged horse in the middle of flight.

“I’d think finding out who cast that would be more urgent,” Draco said.

Harry curbed his irritation. He doesn’t like it that Connor’s doing better than he is in the Animagus training, I understand that. He tossed the coin back to Draco. “I already know,” he said. “It’s not a secret, really. I asked Zacharias to check for me, because I know he has some contacts in the Ministry. This is a symbol for Shield of the Granian, a militant group of flying horse breeders. They’ve fought back before when the Ministry was going to pass laws that restricted breeding or imposed price controls.”

Draco stared at him. “Stupid of them to use coins that proclaim their identity,” he said at last.

Harry shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. No one’s ever found out who’s in Shield of the Granian. Either they’re all good at glamours or they have someone who can Transfigure their faces and then put them

back. And, of course, the breeders themselves disavow all their tactics. I suppose they might be afraid that I'm going to free the Granians and other flying horses they breed. But I'm not convinced this came from them." He nodded at the coin in Draco's hand. "I think now that Falco Parkinson was spying on me and told the attackers the time of my meeting with Skeeter. I've set up wards against him doing that again in his sea eagle form. But it could have been disused remnants from the Order of the Phoenix, for all I know."

"I don't like it," Draco said. "I think you should stay here with me so that we can talk about it some more."

Harry snorted. "You want to talk about other things."

Draco sighed and rolled his eyes. "And is that a crime?"

"Not at all," said Harry quietly. "But I want to spend time with my brother right now, Draco."

"So the problem is still lack of time."

"And someone else reminding me that I haven't given as much time to Connor as I could have," Harry agreed, and turned away. He felt Draco's frustration behind him as Harry slipped down the hallway, but he said nothing else.

Good. Harry shook his head. He had to admit he was feeling a bit harried with all these problems pushing in on him.

But he had chosen the vast majority of them, via his oaths and his acceptance of the positions and power other people handed him, and so he couldn't complain, but had to do the best he could. Besides, it really shouldn't have taken Connor's girlfriend to tell him he was neglecting Connor. Harry should have seen that for himself.

Connor was trying to understand what Harry wanted, he really was, but so far Harry was stumbling over his words and being tongue-tied, so it didn't work. Connor half-wished Harry would make a speech. He had liked Harry's speech about the Unspeakables, and he'd understood all of it.

“But you want to have fun,” he said, trying to clarify the matter.

Harry shrugged as if embarrassed and scuffed one trainer on the floor of Connor’s bedroom. “I’d like to have fun with you,” he said. “I’ve missed you, Connor. I want to spend time with you.”

“You are,” said Connor, mystified. “We’re having Animagus training together every day.”

“Time other than in lessons,” Harry clarified, sounding even more flustered.

“Then you could have said so,” Connor said, and laid his book on Animagus forms aside. So far, he’d eliminated relatively few animals his form might be; as he’d told Peter, there were many, many medium-sized mammals with four legs. “I don’t mind practicing Quidditch, if you want to.”

Harry smiled as if he had forgotten there was such a thing as Quidditch, but was happy to be reminded. “I’d like that.”

Connor went to a corner of his room to pick up his Nimbus, while Harry used a Summoning Charm on his Firebolt, which seemed to be his favorite method of attracting it. Connor studied his brother out of the corner of his eye as they jogged towards the door in Cobley-by-the-Sea that led out onto the cliffs. Lines of strain and tension were leaving Harry’s face, and now and then he smiled as though he were envisioning catching the Snitch out of the air.

This is good for him, then. Connor contemplated something he hadn’t before—certainly not when he thought of himself as the Boy-Who-Lived. I reckon he gets tired of being a hero.

They stepped out onto the cliffs, and Connor felt the crash and thud of the waves far below. He breathed in the salt air. It was bracing, and he thought it would be interesting to fly on their brooms where the winds crossed and divided in front of the rocky walls. He hopped onto his Nimbus, and darted over the side.

“Not fair!” Harry complained, but he was up on his own broom in a moment, and Connor knew the Firebolt could catch the Nimbus any day, so he wasn’t particularly worried about it being fair. He was more curious to see if he could continue flying straight into the wind ahead of him now, or if he would be forced to swerve.

Swerve, he thought, as a current forced him towards the cliffs. Connor turned his broom, pushing straight into it, and the wind howled and plastered his robes to his body. Connor whooped. He wondered if Harry even heard the sound, though; the air was fierce enough to push it away.

He found himself shivering, wishing for gloves and other Quidditch gear they hadn’t taken the time to put on, but then strangled the wish. The wind wasn’t that cold, even if it did have the teeth of the ocean in it. He rose, and then rode out over the Atlantic.

The sea was gray beneath him, vast and shuddering and white-capped. Connor thought about dipping down and wetting his feet in the foam, but decided that he would be good. It would probably panic Harry to see him diving into a situation like that without protection.

His thoughts ran along that track until he turned around to see what his twin was doing, and saw him diving straight down, apparently trying a Wronski Feint on a breaker. He pulled out of it in time to avoid crashing, but as he plunged through a trough and then rose again, the next wave caught him a solid slap across the body.. Harry yelped, and spat salt water. His hair was already streaming, his glasses so thick with water that Connor wondered why he didn’t just pull them off. Connor laughed, and was abruptly happier than he’d been since he learned Harry was going to the Sanctuary, and why.

“Watch where you’re going!” he called.

“I suppose you could do better, then,” Harry yelled back.

Connor snorted. “Who do you think you’re talking to?” he shouted, steering his broom around a particularly stiff wind. “I’m not only a Seeker, I’m a Gryffindor Seeker. That means we automatically take risks that you Slytherins are too cowardly to try.”

He thought, as he said the words, that he would have meant them only two years ago. And though it was hard to see from this distance and with his sea-splattered glasses, he thought he could see Harry's eyes widen as he heard both the words and the playful tone.

We're both so different from what we were, Connor thought in satisfaction. They tried to mold us, and they didn't succeed. Take that, Lily.

If he kept on thinking like that, though, he would have to think about Sirius, and Connor still missed him, so he put it out of his head to listen to Harry's reply.

"You mean that Gryffindors are idiots who think with their balls instead of their heads," Harry said carelessly. He held out his hand, gripping his Firebolt with his knees, and a ball of golden light, about the size of a Snitch, formed in his palm. Connor squinted to keep track of it as Harry bounced it up and down. "But they're even bigger bluffers."

Connor snorted. "Right."

"Let's see you catch this, then." Harry whipped the ball of light away from him. It immediately arced and headed down towards the waves, now and then weaving back and forth like a feather. "And Wronski Feint only."

Connor tossed his head back and half-reared his broom. He knew he was grinning like an idiot, but he didn't care. Merlin, this is fun. He waited for the Snitch-ball to settle on a wave, and then he dived.

The wind was strong enough to feel like someone punching him in the mouth. The cold bit him so badly that his hands shook where they gripped the broom. He was peripherally aware of not only wind but water darting around him, and while he understood the air, a few minutes of watching the ocean wasn't enough to understand that.

He didn't care. This was the most brilliant thing ever.

He cut in close to the top of the wave, and stretched out his right hand. He clasped it around the ball of golden light, which warmed his palm slightly, and opened his mouth to crow.

Water flooded it instead, and the taste of salt. Connor felt the rearing wave catch the tail end of his broom at the same time, creating just enough of a tug that he unbalanced when he tried to dart back into the air. He tipped sideways, and upside down, and another wave engulfed him.

Connor kept one hand on his broom and the other on the golden ball of light, which meant he had none free to pinch his mouth and nose shut. He swallowed a great deal of salt and began coughing. He'd heard that sea water didn't kill you on the first drink, but it tasted bloody awful. Maybe it just took a second or third gulp.

He pulled his legs in towards his chest and kicked out again, hard. That had helped when he swam in the small pond near their house in Godric's Hollow. But the Atlantic wasn't a pond. He stuck his foot straight into some other current that spun him off-course. Meanwhile, water pressed on his chest like a great hand, and more flooded in through his nostrils and mouth, and he couldn't get a breath, and his eyes stung so badly from salt that he wanted to close them, and he had lost track of his path back to the surface.

He thought he heard Harry shouting his name, but that could just be what he wanted to hear. Certainly, the ringing in his ears and the wild thumping of his heart was too loud to really let him hear anything else.

Then a hand grabbed him, and so did something invisible that Connor guessed was a powerful Levitation Charm, and together they pulled him out of the water. Connor gasped, and then wondered why he couldn't breathe yet, and then a great sluice of water came up his throat and answered the question on its own. He coughed frantically. Harry pounded his back, and he choked and more water came out.

"Connor, can you hear me?" Harry's voice was frantic. "Can you nod?"

Of course he could nod; Connor let his head fall forward and then fall back. Harry choked on a gasp of his own, and the pounding hand and Levitation Charm went back to work. Connor blinked, and blinked, and finally made sense of what he was seeing. He was lying face-down across Harry's Firebolt, staring at the sea below, while his Nimbus dangled in front of him and his right hand remained clutched tight around the golden Snitch-ball.

He was safe. He relaxed as much as he could while Harry practically beat him, because when he could finally talk again, he knew just what he wanted to say.

He spat and heaved and coughed and hiccupped, and finally the half of the Atlantic he'd swallowed was back where it belonged. Harry helped him sit up, and all the while he was talking, his words spilling over each other in panic and relief.

"Connor, I'm so sorry—I never should have done that—I should have known better than to think—"

Connor held up his right hand and opened it, displaying the golden ball. Harry fell silent; Connor thought it was in shock.

"I told you that Gryffindors don't bluff," Connor said, his voice more of a croak than he would have liked, but still making his point.

Predictably, his brother said, "But I almost killed you, it was a bloody stupid dare—"

"It was fun," Connor said firmly. He reconsidered a moment, then added, "Except for the almost-drowning part."

Harry said nothing.

Connor twisted around, letting the Snitch-ball go so that he could clasp Harry's shoulder and peer straight into his worried eyes. "Really, it was," he said. "You're not responsible for every tiny thing that happens to me, Harry. And that was fun. I like a bit of danger, you know." He grinned. "I'm Gryffindor."

“But if I hadn’t—“

“But you did, and I went after it, and it was fun,” said Connor. He laughed. “And it proved that I’m the better Seeker than you are after all, because of the risks I take for my team. Watch!”

He swung his leg over Harry’s broom and hopped off it. Harry shrieked like Parvati might. Connor had never let go of his Nimbus, though, and after one exciting moment of tangling limbs and freefalling, he was mounted on his own broom again. He swung around Harry, laughing.

“You need to relax, Harry,” he told his brother. “It’s not normal to scream this much when you’re having fun.”

Harry only shook his head, staring at him. Connor blinked. “What?”

“I wondered how you stayed so open even when bad things happened to you,” Harry muttered. “Now I think it has a lot to do with growing a sense of humor, and not brooding on your mistakes.”

Connor grinned. “You have been sadly deficient in that regard, Harry.”

Harry just nodded, taking it too seriously again. Connor changed the subject. “Why could you put me on your Firebolt, anyway?” he asked. “I thought Draco had it charmed so only you could ride it.”

Harry’s face changed in an instant. “I’m going to kill him for that,” he said. “I had to break the damn charms before I could pull you up here, and I thought I was going to lose my grip.” He considered Connor for a moment. “Which do you think would be more fun: yelling at Draco for that, or just letting him notice that the charms are gone and then telling him the reason?”

Harry, Connor reflected sadly, had a lot to learn about pranking. “Neither, of course,” he said. “You come in alone and pretend I’ve drowned because the Firebolt flung me off when you tried to use it to rescue me. Then I show up behind Draco and give him a heart attack.”

Harry hesitated a long moment. "I don't think—"

"He deserves it for being such an utter tosser," said Connor firmly. "I know that he wanted to give you something of your own for your birthday, but charming the Firebolt so I couldn't ride it was just stupid."

"It was," Harry muttered.

"Yes, it was," Connor coaxed. "Come on. This is funnier."

Harry hesitated for another moment. "I'm not saying I'll do it," he began.

Connor grinned and went to work persuading him. The expression on Draco's face would be completely worth it, in his opinion, but even more worth it would be teaching Harry to have some fun again.

And some fun with me. I have missed him.

Chapter Fourteen: Vox Populi

Bang!

Draco watched as the feathers flurried down around him, and tried to convince himself that exploding a pillow was better than making Connor Potter's head explode. And then he remembered that perhaps it was, but he didn't want to feel morally good right now, he wanted to feel satisfied, and this wasn't helping.

Someone knocked tentatively on his door. Draco ignored it. He knew who it was, and he didn't want to talk to that person right now. He didn't even want an apology from that person right now. When that person had had a good amount of time to brood on his mistake, then he might have something to say that Draco would listen to.

Draco pointed his wand and intoned another curse. This time, his headboard exploded. Draco exhaled harshly. That's something very good about being here, he thought. In Malfoy Manor, he would have had house elves Apparating in right now, squeaking in distress about Master Draco's property being destroyed. But here, he could destroy anything he liked and only worry about a handy little Reparo afterwards. Maybe Harry was right, and life was easier without house elves.

Well, he'll have the opportunity to see if he's right about something else, too, and whether it really is easier to sleep without me in his bed for the next few nights, Draco thought. This time, he cast at the wall. The walls of Cobley-by-the-Sea were stone, though, and so thick with wards that Draco's spell bounced back at him. He had to raise a quick Protego, and that calmed him a bit.

Draco sat down on the bed, running a hand through his hair and closing his eyes. Harry had come in alone, his face so distressed that Draco had believed him immediately when he started talking about the charms on the Firebolt and Connor drowning. Draco realized now that Harry had been distressed over agreeing to play the prank on him, but that didn't matter. He'd still gone along with his brother.

"Draco?" Harry asked.

“Go away,” Draco said, and then flopped back on his bed and folded his arms behind his head, scowling up at the canopy.

“Draco, I wanted to apologize and say—“

“I don’t want to hear it!” Draco yelled, and that silenced Harry’s knocking and talking both. Harry sighed a moment later, and Draco heard the sound of him walking away from the door.

He told himself that was what he wanted, but moments later his mood had changed and he wanted Harry to have continued talking at him, maybe even yelling back, and knocking down the door if he had to. That would have showed real dedication, and that he was so sorry he would rather spend the evening coaxing Draco to talk than with that stupid bloody brother of his.

Draco knew he was being childish, he recognized it, and he didn’t care.

He took a deep breath. His thoughts slowly ceased racing in fury around the center point of his indignation and calmed down. He clenched his hands in the sheets, but didn’t reach for his wand to curse something else, and that was a bit of an improvement.

Why can’t Harry behave like a normal person? he asked the unfair universe that had made him fall in love with a boyfriend who still treated a snog as a special occasion. Why couldn’t he see that playing that prank on me would have hurt me, and so why couldn’t he refuse to go along with it?

The thing was, Harry had realized it, and had been sorry immediately afterwards. Draco could acknowledge that. But that didn’t change the fact that he had gone along with it in the first place.

He punched a hand into the pillow. He had believed that that prat Connor was dead, damn it!

Draco closed his eyes and breathed out harshly. He was getting upset again, and if he let that happen, then Potter would have won.

So Father had always said, and Draco had no reason to distrust his father on this score. He concentrated on breathing while he picked through all his reasoning in his mind.

Harry had told him he wanted to spend more time with Connor. That was one thing. But even that was iron-clad; Draco could almost believe Harry had created a schedule for spending time with his brother and other people the way he had for studying various subjects until Hogwarts started. Why couldn't he see that he didn't have to regiment his hours? He could handle crises as they arose, and he could spend lazy afternoons as well as lazy mornings in bed with Draco.

Harry was living too much of his life too consciously, and Draco didn't like it. He knew that Connor was Harry's brother, just like the werewolves were Harry's pack now and Snape was Harry's guardian. But Harry seemed convinced that he had to balance them, instead of just—just living with them.

His thoughts might have gone on spinning down that path if he hadn't remembered something that Blaise Zabini, the traitor, of all people, had said to him once. Draco had wanted Harry to wake up and notice that he was in love with him, and Blaise had told him that if he were waiting for Harry to act like a normal person, he'd have a long wait.

And that's true, isn't it? Draco sighed and opened his eyes again, waving his wand and casting Reparo at the headboard. His training, his new political life, all the rest of it, probably make him think that he does need to grant a certain amount of time to each person, and he probably felt like he needed to go along with the prank to keep his brother happy. Then he hated it when he saw how unhappy he'd made me, but still, his focus was on what we felt. Not on what he felt. He's not normal in that he couldn't judge what effect on him that prank would have.

Damn it. I hate his mother. It's still all tangled and writhing around him, even though he's so much better in so many ways.

Draco entertained a pleasant fantasy of torturing Lily Potter for a little while, then pushed it away. That wouldn't do anything productive.

Besides, trying to figure out how to break into Tullianum gave him a headache.

He would be the bigger person, he decided. He would be the one who understood what the prank had done to Harry, since the Potter prat was probably still laughing his head off and Harry would be brooding on anything but that. He would be the one who looked at the person in the middle.

Is it fair that I have to be? No, it's not. But it's not fair that Harry has to divide his days up either.

Besides, this way I get to push more. Draco smiled. Potter just wants jokes out of Harry. I want much more important things, and I get to have them. There's no reason that I can't be both caring and self-interested.

He would wait until the morning to approach Harry about it, though, Draco decided. Then he would start on the clean slate of a new day, and Harry would be more likely to think he wasn't angry any more.

Satisfied, Draco repaired the pillow and curled up for a nap. Meditating on the Animagus form he should have been able to see already was exhausting.

"Good morning, Malfoy."

"Good morning," Draco said neutrally as he entered the kitchen. The werewolves still called him by his last name most of the time. Draco had to call them by their first names, because most of them had no surnames, or had rejected them. He most often compromised by calling them nothing at all.

Camellia glanced up at him from where she was turning sausages over, her eyes darkening as they focused on the doorway. "Harry's not with you?"

"Not right now." Draco stepped around her to pour himself orange juice, rather enjoying the piercing way her gaze focused on him.

“Why not?”

“We had a row yesterday,” Draco said, and leaned against the counter so he could sip his orange juice. “He played a stupid prank on me.” He shrugged. “I forgave him, and I’m going to talk to him this morning, but we didn’t sleep in the same bed last night.”

Camellia continued cooking the sausages for a moment, while her frown deepened. Then she put down the pan and leaned forward, looking at him. Draco snorted inwardly and waited. He had thought one member of the pack would approach him with an “If you hurt our alpha” speech sooner or later, and it made sense that it would be Camellia who did that, since she was the one who spent the most time around Harry.

“He’s our alpha,” Camellia breathed. “He’s not a werewolf, so he has no chance of forming a mating bond with any of us. I’m not saying this out of jealousy or a sense of competition, Malfoy. I’m saying this because it’s true. Hurt him, and what’s left of you won’t be recognizable as human.”

Draco sipped his orange juice.

“He’s ours in a way you can’t imagine,” said Camellia, and this time her teeth snapped together. “He’s ours to defend and protect. It’s perfectly obvious that he takes next to no time for himself. We’re going to insist that he does very soon, and without any twitchy little lapdogs ruining it for him either—”

“And you think that insisting on that is the best way to get him to relax?” Draco laughed lightly and examined the back of his wrist. “You should understand. Harry doesn’t know how to relax, unless he’s flying. He tries, but everything becomes another battle for him, or of use to war and politics. And you can’t tell him that you want him to relax, because then he does it as a favor for other people.” He raised his eyes mockingly to her face. “I stand a far better chance of actually breaking down his barriers, because he expects me to be a brat. I can use that. And I can irritate him so much that he won’t realize he’s let his guard down until the moment passes.”

Camellia regarded him without moving or blinking. Draco had heard werewolves understood such staring contests as tests of dominance, but he didn't look away.

"You had better be right," Camellia said a moment later, and turned back to make sure the sausages didn't burn.

"I am," Draco said softly, but she didn't look at him again. He sat down on the other side of the table, and smiled at her back. It was stiff with disapproval. Snape would probably have looked the same way if Draco told him of his plans.

Draco didn't care. It had finally come to him last night, as he was falling asleep, that Harry's problem with the prank and his problem with intimacy were connected. He was too conscious, too afraid of hurting someone else. He was never going to let his control truly go if he could help it.

Draco had to provoke him into letting go, and then he would get what he wanted and Harry would get what he needed. It was a win-win situation.

A few minutes after Camellia brought over breakfast, a strange owl flew in through the window, a lovely gray creature mottled with black spots. Draco eyed her in curiosity as she landed on the table. The Daily Prophet owls were usually instantly recognizable, but though this one carried a thick roll of newspaper around her leg, she didn't look like one of them. She was too alert, and nearly vibrating with importance as she sat there.

Draco picked up a whole sausage link, on instinct, and extended it to her. The owl watched him for a moment, then deemed that acceptable and ate it. Only then did she hold out her leg, haughtiness in every line of her body. Draco removed the cord binding the newspaper. Perhaps it's a special edition.

It wasn't. It was a different paper altogether, with the title flanked by dancing women with long hair. Draco raised his eyebrows. It didn't take much looking to see that the women didn't wear robes, nor much imagination to think of what their long hair cloaked.

The paper's name was also overgrown with vines bearing grapes, and each of the letters on the end melted into fancy type, dripping down into bottles of wine. Thus, it took Draco much longer to read it than it took him to imagine what the women had on, or didn't, under their hair.

Vox Populi, said the title itself. The smaller letters underneath that were ornamented as well, with more grapes and what looked like horns, but easier to read. The Voice of the People.

Draco frowned. I haven't heard anything about this. He looked at the headline, hoping that would provide him with a clue. A moment later, he choked.

Minister Conspiring With Unspeakables

"What's the matter, Draco?" Harry asked just then. Draco felt his hand descend to squeeze his shoulder, and then pause.

Draco read the article beneath the headline. He could feel Harry reading it with him.

According to unimpeachable sources, the Unspeakables of the Department of Mysteries have been hunting our own Chosen One, the former Harry Potter. They cleared the Atrium of witnesses, and attacked him when he went to visit the Ministry on a completely legal and rather important mission. The only companion Harry had was the checkpoint witch, but he still managed to fight the Unspeakables off. According to our sources, the gray-cloaks attempted to collar Harry and use a powerful artifact, stinking of time magic, on him. When he and his companion escaped, the Unspeakables chose to Oblivate them. Little did they know that Harry is a Lord-level wizard, and undoubtedly used to fighting off such tricks.

Our question is: where was the Minister in all this? Why has he said nothing about an attack on the Chosen One in his own Ministry, by his own employees? Why did he not notice that no one except the checkpoint witch was suddenly in the Atrium, that powerful magic was

used—both in the attack and in the escape—and that the checkpoint witch then vanished?

We contend that Minister Scrimgeour knows full well what happened, but is ignoring it in favor of letting the Department of Mysteries do as they liked. What do we know about the Department of Mysteries, anyway? Very little. They are supposedly chosen by an artifact that will not choose anyone disloyal as a servant, but we now ask: loyal to what purpose? Is the artifact really working for the good of wizarding society, as the Unspeakables have always contended, or for the good of the Department of Mysteries, and no one else?

The Minister's trust in this Department is sorely misplaced. Attempting to stalk and capture the hero of the wizarding world, the only one who can defend us from Voldemort, is beyond the pale. We call on Minister Scrimgeour to explain himself, preferably now.

There was no author's name. Of course there wouldn't be, Draco thought, a bit numb. Someone writing an article this inflammatory wouldn't want to be known, even by pseudonym.

There were others things that stunned him more. He had never seen a newspaper print Voldemort's name. He had barely even seen it written, unless Harry was writing the letter. The strident tone made no pretense to the objectivity the Prophet always supposedly sheltered behind, either. Draco shook his head, wondering who in the world was behind this, and why they expected to get away with it.

"Look," said Harry quietly, and turned the page.

Draco blinked. On the second page was a too-familiar photograph of Harry flying at the dragons in the Triwizard Tournament. Draco had long since wondered why they couldn't use another picture of him, perhaps one that was more recent and had Draco in it as well, and showed off the ring proclaiming the joining ritual on Harry's hand.

The headline above it was something new, though.

Did He or Didn't He: Compelling New Evidence that "Chosen One" is the Chosen of Dragons Only

Draco skimmed the article, shaking his head. It argued that Harry hadn't really defended the students at Hogwarts from the dragons when Mulciber cast the Imperio that caused them to break free from their wards; instead, he had communicated with the dragons because he was their hero, their child of prophecy. It mixed truth with lies so merrily that Draco could see how many would be convinced, and there was no author's name on this one, either.

"I don't understand," he said, as he looked through other articles and found ones that talked about Harry as a hero, ones that derided him, ones that argued for the mixing of wizards and Muggles, and ones that said the magical and mundane worlds should remain separate. "What is their stance?"

"I don't think they have one." Harry flipped the paper over to the very back, and touched something Draco hadn't noticed yet, the name of the publisher and press.

Dionysus Hornblower, The Maenad Press.

Draco grimaced. He had actually heard of the Hornblower family, though not of Dionysus in particular. They were mad eccentrics who usually didn't Declare, but had plenty of Galleons thanks to a few common, useful transportation spells they'd invented centuries ago. They interbred with Muggles and halfbloods and Veela and whoever else caught their eyes, usually without the benefit of marriage. Lucius had warned Draco never to have dealings with a Hornblower, unless he was using a binding oath with wording he'd chosen himself. If there was a way to cause chaos, a Hornblower would find it.

And Dionysus had been the Greek god of wine, revelry, and madness, and the Maenads had been his followers, women who went wild and danced their way through the hills. Draco flipped the paper back over and looked again at the dancing women around the title.

The Maenads had also torn apart wild beasts and men they caught, from what Draco remembered. They were utterly indiscriminate in their choice of victims; mothers had slaughtered their sons if the god had commanded them to. Hornblower naming his press after them

and choosing them as the emblem of his paper was as close to a declaration of war on all sides as Draco could imagine.

“They’re going to publish anything they want,” Harry murmured. “And most of it won’t be believed, doubtless, but they have some accurate information.” He touched the leading article again. “They had to have talked to someone who was at my festival, or perhaps the writer was there himself.”

“Why, though?” Draco asked. “There are so many other ways that this Dionysus could cause trouble, with much less expense to himself. Why this one in particular?”

“I’m glad you asked that question.”

Draco jerked his head up. The gray-and-black owl had stayed on the table, though he hadn’t noticed; most post owls left after they’d been rewarded for their delivery. She had her wings spread, fanned out, and her beak open. A cloud of glittering light floated out of her beak, and formed the image of a wizard, probably in his thirties, smiling at them.

Draco immediately didn’t like him. He had a look that Draco had seen only once before: on the face of the werewolf called Loki. It was a look that said he wasn’t in control of everything, but he would fling the Severing Curses anyway and let the blood fly and settle where it would. That quite twisted what Draco thought would have been an ordinary face otherwise, with gray eyes and brown hair and a tiny birthmark on one cheek.

“I sent this message with most owls, but most people aren’t going to ask.” Dionysus sat behind a desk of some kind. Now he leaned forward confidingly over it and winked with his left eye. “Now, you, you’re curious. You want to know what’s been going on. That’s good. That’s proper. That’s the first step on the road to true freedom.

“Simply put, the Vox Populi exists to publish those articles that most people won’t ever get to read, thanks to the Prophet and its vicious politics of strangling dissent at the mouth.” Dionysus sneered. “I’ll publish anything anyone sends to me, and the only editing I do is for

grammar. That's the only thing that could shame my paper. The truth never can."

"You don't know what the truth is, you old git," Draco muttered, but of course the sending couldn't hear him, and prattled on.

"I pay for everything, and pay the writers, too, so you don't need to worry about the expense of printing. I want everyone to know the truth. The Ministry's had everything its own way for far too long. And now we're moving into a war, into a revolution, and they want to pretend that nothing's changed." Dionysus's eyes glittered in a way that Draco thought was unhealthy. "That's not true. I'm taking my example and my inspiration from Harry vates, who is our prophet and seer as much as he's for the magical creatures. He values freedom, and well he should! Freedom is the most important thing in the world."

Draco couldn't help turning his head to see what impact that had on Harry. He found Harry watching the sending with an expression born of resignation. Harry caught his eye and turned his hand palm-up, mouthing something Draco could barely hear under Dionysus's rattle. Sow the wind, reap the whirlwind.

"—And now we have a force that can challenge the Ministry." Dionysus nodded several times, as if to prove that he really, really believed in it. He's a Hornblower, of course he does, Draco thought. "We have one paper that can centralize and vocalize all the dissent, and let our people know that they're not alone. They can realize that centaurs think the same way they do, and that the people they always respected just because they were pureblood don't deserve that respect, and that they can say so.

"Our motto, besides being the voice of the people, is the same as the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. We aren't afraid, and our enemies can't make us be."

The sending stopped talking, and a moment later the light dissolved and poured back into the owl's mouth. She gave a little shake of her feathers, then leaped into the air and sped out the window as though afraid they would kill the messenger.

Draco twisted to look up at Harry again. "You didn't need that," he said.

Harry huffed out a breath, and sat down on the opposite side of the table, taking the paper with him as he went. "No, I didn't," he said, staring at some of the articles, "but I can hardly control what people do, either, or think that my example is going to inspire only restraint."

Draco folded his arms. "Must you be so—so reasonable all the time?" he hissed.

Harry looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"You can get angry," Draco told him. Camellia dodged between them to set a plate full of sausages down in front of Harry, but Harry, his eyes on Draco, didn't appear to notice. "You've been doing well with it since the Sanctuary. And now it's—drying up again." He couldn't find a word that fit what he wanted to say better. "You're acting as though anything anyone does in your name, you can't be angry about, and you can't denounce."

"Well, I plan to say that I didn't help to establish or fund the Vox Populi, if anyone asks," said Harry, sounding a bit bewildered. "But I can't be angry that Hornblower took my example and ran with it in a direction I wish he hadn't. Of course that was going to happen sooner or later. I've set myself up as a political figure, Draco, the leader of an alliance. People are going to misunderstand me and misinterpret me and worship me in ways I wish they wouldn't. That's practically a given. It still makes me uncomfortable, but that's not the same thing as angry. I chose this position, I chose the game, I chose the consequences. I have to live with them."

Draco shook his head and waved one hand in his fury. "And you're going to divide yourself up again to deal with this problem—"

"Actually," said Harry, a small smile creeping over his lips, "I'm not."

Draco blinked. "What?"

"I have too much happening already." Harry laid down the paper and leaned forward. "I've reached the limit of what I can deal with by myself. That's why I asked Hermione to research the legal loopholes in the anti-werewolf laws, and Zacharias Smith to research that flying horse symbol. And now I'm looking for a good solicitor to help us represent the werewolves, through Miriam Smith. I thought about going through the Gloryflowers, but everyone and her second cousin knows that Laura Gloryflower's niece is a werewolf now, so that won't work. The Smiths are still terribly respectable. I can't do that all myself, I'm pressed for time to just do the essential things—"

"Like eating your breakfast," Camellia muttered, drifting up behind him.

Harry obediently picked up his fork, but didn't let the interruption faze him. "—And this situation is the same way. I'm going to ask someone else to handle it for me." He took a few more bites, not removing his eyes from Draco.

Draco shook his head. "Who?" He couldn't think of many other allies who could move with impunity in the circles Dionysus Hornblower traveled. The werewolves were in danger of arrest if they set foot outside the Black houses, Dionysus Hornblower had no respect for blood status and no reason to listen to pureblood money, Harry's allies in the Ministry were right out, Pettigrew had few if any political connections, and Harry would probably not trust Snape to control his temper.

"You."

Draco blinked again. "Pardon?" he said at last, in what he knew was a rather faint voice.

Harry cocked his head, and his eyes glittered, bright and sharp. "Draco," he said quietly. "I know you made a few connections in the Ministry last year, after we defeated Dumbledore. I didn't know it at the time, but I figured it out later. You've kept them up, haven't you? You've not just let them go."

Draco nodded reluctantly. He really didn't think Harry had noticed, to tell the truth. Those connections would have been a nice way to surprise him.

"I think you'll be able to communicate with them more easily than I'm able to talk to anyone in the Ministry, Scrimgeour included." Harry leaned back and clasped his hand behind his head, ignoring Camellia's mutters about food. "And I know that some of them have respect for the Malfoy name and the Malfoy money—but you're not your father. You don't have as intimidating a reputation preceding you. You can make them underestimate you and take them by surprise.

"You can possess people as well. And I know you can read minds, not just control actions. That ought to be bloody useful in figuring out secrets."

"You don't think it's unethical?" Draco blurted. He'd thought of using his possession gift in just that way, but he had assumed Harry would hate the idea.

Harry looked down at his plate without seeing it. "If you're going to control their actions, then I would say yes," he murmured. "It was hard to condone that even for the Midsummer battle, when I knew it was kill or be killed. But this situation, while less desperate, is certainly consumed with spying." He took a deep breath. "I won't let my enemies drive me around in circles, Draco. I'll ask someone else to liaise with the Maenad Press. Honoria, I think. Her illusions are good for so much in that line, and she'd be thrilled to be asked.

"I need information, Draco. Now that the Unspeakables are in the battle, it's more crucial than it was before. Even your father couldn't tell me that much about them. And most of the ways of getting information are unethical in one sense or another. I'm never going to torture people for it, but this?" Harry looked up and nodded. "Yes, I think this will work. If you promise that you won't use the information just to fulfill personal grudges, or your possession to control their actions unless it's a matter of life and death."

Draco threw his head back. He felt warmth spreading over him like sunshine. Harry's trust honored him, and violating it would not be worth the momentary satisfaction he might gain from revenge.

"So you want me to help with managing your reputation altogether, don't you?" he asked softly. "Keep an eye on how it changes, what new rumors are rising, how the Vox Populi and the other papers are affecting things?"

Harry nodded again. "Yes. Scrimgeour was going to do that for me while I was in the Sanctuary, but...well."

Draco cocked his head. His mind felt full of possibilities, burgeoning like the grapes growing around the title of the Vox Populi. He wondered for a moment if Harry felt like this all the time, then tried to dismiss the thought, because that just made him shudder.

"It would be more than just having a few contacts in the Ministry, Harry, you know that," he said. "I'd want to fight for you on several different levels. I'd try to recruit people for the Alliance, find out what the Unspeakables were doing, discredit your opponents."

"I know that."

"Have you abandoned your morals, then?" Camellia did not sound at all pleased. "I would not see you become different than you are now, Wild, simply to satisfy the political requirements of wizards."

Harry leaned back in his chair and shook his head at her. "I've accepted that I can't win this battle if I do nothing," he said quietly. "And doing nothing would be the only way to insure that I made no questionable decisions. I am vates. I have to push forward. I have to speak news that people won't want to hear. And if someone imposes on the free will of another, I have to fight back against that. The trouble will be restraining myself so that I only fight back until that other person's free will is restored, and then stop." He let out a breath and looked at Draco. "So, Draco, I'm trusting you to bring me the information unless the situation is so urgent that you have to act immediately and you don't have time to reach me. Don't just use it indiscriminately."

"That's why you can trust me and no one else in this position," said Draco, while more ideas grew. He had acquaintances among the seventh-year Slytherins Harry had never bothered to make; he had never been as close to his own Housemates as many other Slytherins were, coming from a Light-devoted family who'd hidden away from the wizarding world. "I want to defend you, Harry, you know that, not just advance my own interests."

Harry grinned at him. "Your interests are intertwined with mine. I understand that much, Draco." He hesitated for a moment, then said, "By the way, I'm sorry for the row we had yesterday."

Draco was glad that he'd already decided to accept and forgive. It made him able to nod and say, "You played that prank because you wanted to please your brother, didn't you?"

A tension he hadn't realized Harry was carrying melted out of his shoulders. "Yes," he said, leaning towards Draco. Over Harry's shoulder, Draco caught a glimpse of Camellia scowling ferociously. He smirked at her and clasped Harry's hand. Harry didn't seem to notice the byplay. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done it. It made you feel so terrible, and I felt guilty for hours afterward." He hesitated, as if pondering whether he should speak the next words at all, then offered, "I didn't sleep well last night."

Draco felt a flash of triumph, but he adopted the most innocent expression he could. "Because you felt guilty?"

"Because you weren't there," Harry mumbled, his cheeks flushing even more brightly.

Camellia scowled again. Draco raised Harry's hand to his lips, eyes challenging. Camellia whipped around and stalked away.

Draco did believe that she wasn't jealous of Harry as a werewolf would be of a potential mate. But her jealousy was actually more dangerous in the long run. Relatively few people might want to share Harry's bed (though Draco didn't believe that, because how could anyone not want to?). Dozens of them would struggle to be close to

him, some for the wrong motives. And the ones with the right motives could still exhaust him, as he would want to give them all appropriate time and attention.

Draco would make sure that that didn't happen. He would evaluate the people who wanted to come close, and send off the ones who would drain Harry more than they would help him. If he was going to be recruiting members for the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, he would be the guard and first line of defense there.

That would help Harry, and it would help Draco. He wanted Harry to be relaxed and happy. And by this time, the selfish reasons and the unselfish ones for that were so tightly interwoven that he wondered if one could actually separate them anymore.

"I've already forgotten that prank," said Draco, being absolutely honest, because it had led him to this point and because it made Harry's eyes brighten. "I'd like to sleep with you again tonight, if you'll let me."

"I want you to," Harry said at once.

His gaze moved away from Draco then, falling on the Vox Populi, and the lines around his mouth tightened. "I was going to talk to Snape about that book," he said, and, after one more squeeze to Draco's hand, stood and wandered out of the kitchen, leaving his breakfast mostly uneaten.

Draco snorted. He needs a distraction. We both do. I am going to provide one.

He leaned back and smirked at the ceiling. And if it's a distraction that will provoke him to the point of lowering his barriers, so be it. That's the only way he'll truly relax, and the only way he'll be refreshed when he has to face what's coming after this.

Draco picked up the Vox Populi and made his way towards the door. He had letters to write and research to do. Time to see if some of the tidbits of information that his father had mentioned on the Hornblower family over the years were grounded in rumor or fact.

Chapter Fifteen: Draco Decides To Be a Distraction

"And you think that you need the book?" Snape's voice was casual, and only his grip on the silver stirring stick showed how tense he was. Harry had interrupted him in the middle of brewing yet another new potion. Sometimes he thought this was how Snape stayed sane in the middle of so many werewolves.

"I do," said Harry. "I've been having dreams—"

"Visions?" If silver could snap, Harry was sure that Snape's grip would have snapped the stirring stick.

"No, no." Harry smiled, and that didn't appear to reassure his guardian. He held out his hand in a placating gesture instead. "I mean it. They aren't visions. They're not even dreams that let me clearly see the title of the book at first. I think this was more in the nature of my mind realizing what I needed before I did, and prodding me with a few dreams to get my attention."

Snape looked away from him. "That book has passed through the hands of many owners over the years," he said carefully. "If it contained a cure for lycanthropy, I am sure that someone would have noticed."

"Really?" Harry studied his turned face. He looks as if he's sleeping better, at least. I'm glad of that. "From what Draco told me about it, each person who reads it is driven to brew a potion that resonates with their goals. Maybe there is a potion that could cure lycanthropy, but only if someone opens the book looking for just that and nothing else. Or maybe I can create the base and then modify the potion from there."

"It's possible." Reluctance thick as treacle still crowded Snape's voice. He turned around again. "But you cannot be under compulsion, Harry. You are a wizard. Do you forget so easily?"

Harry blinked. "Of course not. But a willingly chosen compulsion is different. If it were really true that a wizard can't compel himself, I couldn't swear binding oaths, either, or make promises."

Snape clenched his teeth. Harry could almost hear him striving for some other way to refuse his request, though he wasn't using Legilimency. Harry made his voice as gentle, as warm, as persuasive, as possible.

"I promise I won't misuse it, sir. I promise I'll bring it back to you the moment I have the list of ingredients copied down—"

"That won't be possible," said Snape. "The book makes you want to keep it with you until the potion is completed. If you could simply separate yourself from it when you'd chosen the recipe, then Melissa Prince's spell wouldn't work." He hesitated a moment. "She was an ancestor of mine," he added.

Harry blinked. "She was?" Now that he thought about it, he supposed he remembered someone telling him Snape had descended from the Prince line, but he refused to claim any of the (largely empty) honors that could have been his, including having the Prince coat of arms on the back of his chair at the equinox alliance meeting.

"Yes," said Snape, and then turned away and stared into the cauldron again.

Harry narrowed his eyes. I know he's a halfblood who wasn't raised in the pureblood rituals. And I know the Prince line was proud enough that they were horrified at the thought of producing a bastard child when that Muggleborn Lord claimed to be related to them, even if he did have Lord-level power. A parent—a mother—who married a Muggle or a Muggleborn...

I wonder what she would think of herself? I wonder what her family would think of her?

And Snape's face was darkening with shadows again, as if all the nights of good sleep meant nothing in the face of this revelation. Harry took a deep breath and guessed.

"Are the dreams about your mother, sir?"

Snape turned so suddenly and so viciously that Harry stumbled back a step. This time, his magic must have lent its strength to his hand, because the silver stirring stick actually bent under his fingers. Harry shuddered a bit, and Snape looked down and seemed to realize what he'd done. Carefully, he laid the silver stick aside.

"They are about nothing important," Snape said.

Harry could almost hear the rattle of scorpion stings in his words. Ice was slowly creeping across the walls, and it wasn't Harry's. He knew that Snape could have a cold temper himself on occasion, though; fourth year was a more than good enough example of that.

"All right, sir," he said quietly.

Snape eyed him for a moment, then swept across the room. Harry waited while he rummaged through a trunk. Snape had explained that he never let the book out of his possession unless someone else was borrowing it with his permission; the compulsion spell on it, and the potions within, were too dangerous. Harry could understand.

He remembered the expression on Snape's face a few moments ago, and wished there were other things he understood as well.

Snape turned and tossed the book to him. Harry caught and examined it. It had a handsome, dark cover, with the words that he remembered seeing from the time when Draco was brewing a potion to summon Julia Malfoy on the cover. *Medicamenta Meatus Verus*, or Potions of the True Path.

And he could feel the magic. It woke at once, rolling around the cover and in between the pages, purring and laughing and rubbing against his fingers like a cat. It wanted to reach out to him, Harry thought. It was already looking at him, tracking inconsistencies in his own principles, searching for cracks that would allow its compulsion to bind him.

This is freely chosen, he reminded himself, and concentrated on a potion to cure the lycanthropy curse, and let the book fall open.

The purring sound in his ears intensified, and then the book's pages turned as if an invisible hand manipulated them. Harry felt the web curl around his shoulders like Argutus, and it whispered words he couldn't quite make out. He waited for the book to settle on a page, his heart pounding hard.

And then it did, and Harry glanced down the page, and almost laughed aloud. It was no wonder that no one had managed to work out a cure to the lycanthropy curse so far, he thought. This was a potion to free the soul and the body from a curse, but a note in neat handwriting towards the bottom stated: To break any truly powerful curse, this potion must be invested with some of the bearer's magic.

Most of the people preparing the potion wouldn't want to sacrifice their own magic, Harry thought. Or they wouldn't have any idea how to do it, except to a magical heir. I'm absorbere. I can do this.

"Harry?"

That was Snape's voice, somewhere beyond the roaring in his ears. Harry blinked and looked up at him. "Hmmm?"

"You will be well?"

Harry nodded, his mind already swimming with plans. Most of the ingredients of the potion were common, but most potions brewers wouldn't think to add them in the order the book recommended, because they were explosive when mixed. The book recommended a magic-infused base that would get around that, though, and Harry knew where a few other useless, pretty artifacts were stored in Silver-Mirror that could give him the magic he needed. "Yes."

Snape sighed, but said, "Then go and begin your brewing, I suppose."

Harry wondered out of the room, still reading the instructions for the potion. But, perhaps because he had had practice before in handling one overriding problem while sparing some time for others, he did make himself a note. Send an owl to Gollrish Y Thie. Get Joseph here to help Snape.

Draco was extremely frustrated. Today was the day he had planned to push, break some of Harry's barriers, and make him relax, but he couldn't find him.

He had used the morning to good effect, writing his contacts in the Ministry, and even some of those more responsible to his father, and playing on the power of his name and his closeness to Harry to ask them to look carefully at the Ministry's anti-werewolf—and anti-Harry—politics. But then he had gone down for lunch, and he couldn't find Harry. None of the werewolves who would talk to him had seen him, either. Peter was busy practicing Animagus training with Connor, and they were both annoyed with Draco for interrupting them when Connor had been about to see his silhouette. Draco privately thought Potter was just being a whiny little brat, as usual, and hadn't been anywhere ready to see it.

It finally occurred to Draco that he might not be at Copley-by-the-Sea, but in one of the other Black houses. He hastened to the library Harry had set up with Floo connections to all four houses, trying to think. Where would he go?

Probably not Wayhouse, he thought. There was no one there, and the house's temperament was so uncertain that Harry had specifically said he didn't want to visit for a while.

Not Grimmauld Place, either. Draco was sure that Snape would have been fuming in that case, over Harry going to talk to Lupin.

He cast a handful of Floo powder into the flames and announced, as confidently as he could given that he'd just reasoned it out, "Silver-Mirror!"

The flames turned green, and Draco hopped in. Briefly, he was whirled around, and then flung out into the main hall of the house, beneath the golden fire-pool. Draco blinked and looked around. He had expected Harry to be in front of the pictures, perhaps pacing, staring at them moodily, and wondering when Regulus would reappear. That would have been a perfect time for Draco to try and

break him out of his brooding. Being teased about said brooding tended to do that to Harry.

Instead, the hall was empty, but Draco could hear low muttering and fussing coming from a side door, one that didn't lead to the wind-pool. He walked over to it and peered carefully around it.

Harry was sorting through a pile of tiny treasures, spoons and statuettes and coins and others that Draco knew no one would have looked at twice if they didn't tremble with magical power. In most cases, though, the spells on them were minor, nothing more than a charm to make them brighter and more polished, or cast a mild illusion that might entertain a child for a few minutes. Harry had had them all piled here after the Midsummer battle, Draco knew. He wanted the treasures he could drain to restore the former Squibs all in one place.

Now, though, he had a cauldron set up beside him, boiling with water and smelling of hedgehog quills and something else that Draco couldn't immediately identify. Draco frowned. Is he actually planning to melt some of those treasures? Why? What would he use molten silver for?

Suddenly Harry gave a small noise of satisfaction and stood up, a tiny mirror in his hand. He breathed on it, and then nodded at whatever he saw there; Draco couldn't see from this angle. He stared, and then Draco felt the pull as he used his absorbere gift on the mirror, drawing the magic from it.

Draco shuddered. He's making a potion that uses a lot of magic? What is it? And I wonder if he's thought that turning all the Black treasures into useless trinkets isn't a good idea? I know he doesn't value them, and Regulus doesn't care, but someone else might.

"Harry?" he asked.

Harry jumped, but not as badly as Draco thought he should have. Instead, he just glanced up, gave a distracted little, "Hmmm," and looked back at the mirror. Then he nodded, dropped it, and walked across to the cauldron. Draco smelled a gush of rose scent as Harry

poured the magic into the potion. It paused for a moment, then began bubbling more enthusiastically.

“What are you doing?” Draco asked, coming further into the room.

“Starting to brew a potion that I hope will be a cure for lycanthropy,” Harry said, as calmly as if he did this every day. He turned and picked up a book lying next to the cauldron. Draco recognized it from the shape of the spine alone. He’d spent two months carrying that book around and staring into it every day. And in the end, he’d summoned the ghost of his ancestor and received—well, empathy, yes, but also a glimpse of how very wrong everything could have gone.

“Harry,” he hissed. “Why on earth are you using that book?”

“Because it’s the only one that might tell me the recipe,” Harry said absently, and flicked a page over. “And the cure is the one part of this process I can really control, at least until Fred and George set up a means of contacting Scrimgeour through Percy. And I want to be able to do something for the werewolves, not just sit around and be a pack leader in a few isolated houses. Once I go back to Hogwarts, I won’t be able to do even that.” He looked up, blinking. “This potion will take some months to brew, but that’s under normal working times. If I concentrate those months into a few weeks of intense effort, then—”

“You’ll be needed to do other things!” Draco came a step forward, vibrating with indignation. “I can’t believe that Snape would be so stupid as to give him that book. “I could barely concentrate on anything else while I was brewing that potion to summon Julia Malfoy. What makes you think you’ll be able to?”

“You could still do your schoolwork and argue with me.” Harry didn’t sound concerned. “I can keep up, Draco. But I had this idea from my dreams, and I finally remembered where I’d seen a book with a title like that when I woke this morning. This is a way to do it.” He smiled at Draco. “I accepted the compulsion willingly. It’s not going to hurt me.”

Draco shook his head, hardly able to find the words. He knows how many different things he has to concentrate on, and then he goes and does—this. I suppose he does think that he'll be able to brew the potion and still do other things. He isn't the kind of person to just abandon his responsibilities.

But he won't be able to. Draco shuddered. His memories of the compulsion creeping into his brain were two years old now, but when he thought of it, they came curving back, cold fingers stroking his thoughts, twisting them in all kinds of different directions. And I think I wanted to be my family's magical heir less than Harry wants to find a cure for lycanthropy. This is going to ride him, and he'll neglect his Animagus training and his political commitments and breaking the curses on his left wrist.

He'll neglect me.

Draco narrowed his eyes. It seemed that his task of distraction was both more necessary and harder than he'd thought. Harry had already turned away again, murmuring to himself as he laid the book down and picked up what looked like a salt cellar but was probably full of another ingredient. The small golden specks that Harry added to the potion with a delicate shake confirmed that.

"Harry," Draco began.

Harry looked up from the potion. "Hmmm?"

"I don't think you should do this," said Draco. He glanced sideways at *Medicamenta Meatus Verus*. He could almost feel the damn book smirking at him. "And you can break the compulsion, I know you can. Breaking webs is what a vates does."

Harry tilted his head to the side. "But why should I want to break this? I want to find a cure for lycanthropy, Draco, and this is my best chance to do so."

Draco came a step forward. "But you could copy down the recipe and then break yourself from the web."

"Snape said I couldn't," said Harry, looking fretful. "Or the spell on the book wouldn't work."

"So what?" Draco demanded.

"Then I wouldn't finish brewing this as fast as possible," said Harry, as if talking to a child. "And I do want to finish it." He turned around and faced the cauldron again, this time adding what looked like the edge of a swan feather. The cauldron gave a contented gurgle which didn't comfort Draco at all.

"This is stupid," said Draco, deciding to be blunt. "You made another spur-of-the-moment decision, and you think that you should finish this because you haven't achieved a victory in a while."

Harry jumped. Then he turned around again, and Draco saw that the words had pierced through his compulsion. Harry didn't like to consider that his motives behind making this choice weren't purely altruistic. But he did want to break another web or brew a potion that would cure lycanthropy to show that not all his victories were compromises like showing the Pensieve memories were. Draco was convinced of it. Harry could be selfish and short-sighted, too.

"That's not true," Harry said, but his eyes were narrowed, and his magic soared up around him enough that the room reeked of roses. "I'm not doing this just to gratify myself."

"No, but you are frustrated," said Draco. Someone else might have been standing behind him and whispering the words into his ear. He could see the pattern Harry had fallen into over the last few days since the festival now, and wanted to kick himself for not seeing it beforehand. "The festival didn't go the way you wanted, with Falco Parkinson showing up and then escaping, and the Pensieve memories not birthing a movement against the Unspeakables. Then you spent time with your brother, and that didn't go the way you wanted, either. And then the Vox Populi came along, and while you delegated me to deal with it, you didn't anticipate it, and that makes you angry. You're trying for something you think will enable you to make a definite step forward. And maybe it will, Harry, but you can't

afford to do nothing else for a few weeks. Which that damn thing will make you do.” He scowled at the book.

“I am not angry,” said Harry, while behind him a pile of small Black artifacts rearranged itself for no apparent reason.

“Of course you aren’t,” said Draco, with a tolerant smile. “And Snape isn’t maddened by the presence of werewolves in the house right now.”

Harry opened his mouth to counter that, but closed it with a growl. He then shut his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

Draco didn’t want to give him time to recover himself. He might decide that continuing on with the book and the madness and the potion was a good idea, and Draco didn’t want that. He could feel the same excitement that he’d discovered this morning at the thought of provoking Harry welling up. He would get out of this what he wanted and Harry what he needed. Pointing out that Harry was stupid to make the same mistake he’d made was just an extra.

“He isn’t thinking about them by driving himself into brewing,” said Draco. “But he can afford that, because no one is looking towards him to lead them. You’re in the opposite situation, sorry, Harry. And it was your own choices that put you there. You were so philosophical about that with the Vox Populi, that people wouldn’t do just what you wanted them to do. And now you’re already running away from it? You expect everyone to pause while you brew this potion?”

The wall behind Draco turned to ice, and a spoon pinged as it was bent out of shape. Draco wished it hadn’t. Harry looked towards the sound, and his face went ashen. He shook his head and closed his eyes, and the smell of roses palpably sank.

“I can’t afford to argue with you about this, Draco,” he said softly. “I have to—“

“Do other things, I know,” said Draco, with a nod. Harry opened his eyes hopefully, and Draco used his words to hit him between them. “You have to run away from your responsibilities. You have to subject

yourself to compulsion from a book you should know better than to trust, after what it did to me. You have to make sure that you do something concrete, even though no one is demanding that lycanthropy cure from you right now. You have to pretend that you're still only a political nonentity, and what you choose to do with your time is your choice. Meanwhile, you deny yourself the right to get angry over something like the Vox Populi, and you assume that you're at fault in that prank, when it was your brother."

Harry swallowed and closed his eyes again. "Draco, stop it," he whispered.

Draco paused and studied him. He frowned. He's far closer to the edge than I thought. I wonder how much time he did spend sleepless because of guilt, not because I wasn't there?

And then his uncertainty fed back into his anger and his determination. If he couldn't sleep because of guilt over that stupid prank, then he lied to me. He should know better than to do that.

Besides, it's a service for me to tip him off this edge. If I don't, then who knows when he might fall and shatter? At least this is a point when people aren't expecting that much from him—and if I can get him to release all this anger and guilt and whatever else is befouling him, then he'll only handle what comes after this better.

Draco wrapped the whole gift to himself with a bow of self-interest. And I'm not frightened by his anger. Quite the opposite. He felt a pull low in his groin at the thought, and went back to work on Harry.

"You're setting yourself up to fall again, you know," he told Harry conversationally. "You've done quite well for the last little while, but now you're retreating into old, and stupid, behaviors. Yes, let's put the vates under a compulsion, that's a wonderful idea. If you're an idiot who thinks he has to keep doing favors for others or people won't love him."

Harry gave a huge, jolting flinch that shook his entire body. "Stop it," he said. "That's not what I think."

“Yes, it is,” said Draco, quick to follow things up now. He could feel the momentum in the room shifting, changing, charging forward, and he didn’t dare lose it. “You accept that we love you, Snape and me and your brother—I wonder if you accept it from anyone else?—but you still think that you need to come up with reasons that we should love you. You still avoid letting us know when you’re angry and trampling on our wills, and not just because of the vates idea. How many times have you smoothed anger back into the depths because you thought we would hate you if you said what you really thought?”

That was too far, deliberately too far, and Draco knew it. Harry’s back stiffened with outrage. Two spoons rose from their pile and sped past Draco, to clatter against the wall next to him. He didn’t flinch, for a simple reason: he wasn’t afraid.

Harry was getting angry, and the anger was a magnificent sight. Draco wished that Harry could see himself in it; then he wouldn’t have asked that stupid question the other day, about whether Draco physically desired him, or only wanted emotional intimacy. His eyes were alight now, with fire that he usually kept too carefully in check out of fear of his magic, and a complex dark star spread out behind him, briefly forming a pair of white-gold wings.

“I know you don’t hate me, and never will,” Harry said, his voice low. “And I’ve really changed in the Sanctuary, and I’m going to keep pushing forward. I promised you that, Draco.”

Draco looked at the book and the cauldron, and raised one eyebrow. He really didn’t have to say anything else.

“This is a choice I made that doesn’t have anything to do with you,” Harry told him.

Draco wanted to cheer. He didn’t think he could yet, though. Harry wasn’t really listening to his own words. Let this drop, and he was too likely to start castigating himself for saying such words at all. Harry made too much of small rows and tiffs and insults, thinking that each was a case of him stepping on someone else’s free will.

"Yes, it does," said Draco. "Why is it that you never rest, Harry? Why is it that you can't relax? Because the only kind of love you've ever been comfortable with is conditional, and you believe that if you wait too long, perhaps the people who love you will think you're lazy, and shift their love somewhere else."

"That's not true!" Harry's dark starburst spread a little further, and a mirror shattered. Draco didn't even duck, because the glass pieces were going the other way. Besides, ducking would also snap the mood.

"You set yourself arbitrary time limits," Draco said. He gestured at the book and the cauldron again. "At least, for those things that you do for other people. You pushed away and ignored your own loss of a left hand for as long as you could, because you didn't want to be thought selfish and weak. You wanted to heal others' grief instead of looking at your own, because Merlin knows that your own grief frightens you."

"Stop it!" Harry was yelling now, his hand clenched. "I'm not afraid!"

"Yes, you are," said Draco, and found himself smiling. He thought he would have been even if he didn't expect a certain very enjoyable result from Harry's broken barriers. "The only times I've ever seen your pain and your grief were when you literally couldn't hide them anymore, Harry. Even in the Sanctuary, you kept most of it hidden because you didn't want to interfere with my healing. Or that's the excuse you gave. It's amusing, really. Other people curl up and cry in fear when they hear someone say Voldemort's name. You curl up and cry in fear because you think someone else might see you in pain."

Harry snapped his hand viciously sideways. Draco found himself unable to move as Harry headed towards him, his eyes brighter than they had been. The white-gold wings were dripping light, but kept resurrecting themselves, stronger illusions on Harry's back each time. Draco was definitely hard now, and more than ready. He wondered how much more pushing it would take.

"That is not true," Harry hissed at him. "Take it back."

Draco raised his eyebrows again. The magic was holding his jaw shut. Harry hesitated, and Draco saw a hint of self-awareness creeping back into his eyes. Any moment now, he was going to blame himself for expressing a reasonable level of anger that he'd been provoked into.

Draco couldn't let that happen.

He still had control of his facial muscles, so he let a deliberately mocking look cross his face, as much to say that he knew the truth when Harry didn't.

Harry stared at him, and Draco felt the pressure of Legilimency. This was even better. He let one thought sound over and over at the forefront of his mind, so that Harry would be sure to hear it. If you're really overcome most of your training, as you've promised me you've been trying to do, then I don't think your fear of bedding me has anything to do with that. I think it's just fear.

Harry snapped.

Harry knew he ought to be able to stop, to slow down. His magic was further out of control than he had ever let it expand before, even when they rode back in the carriage from the Sanctuary and Paton said he had felt it coming. It was blooming and singing around him, and he knew that ought to frighten him.

But those conclusions were like words written on a page pinned on a wall across the room. They might be true, but they couldn't touch him right now.

He just wanted to make Draco shut up and stop saying things that weren't true. Of course he believed that Snape and Draco and Connor loved him unconditionally, of course he wasn't afraid like Draco was insinuating he was—how dare he insinuate that!—and of course he did feel guilty when he had a reason to and didn't mope unreasonably.

And of course his training was still there, and not just ordinary fear of bedding. So he would prove to Draco that the training was still there.

He had the feeling that there was a contradiction in his thoughts somewhere, a place he couldn't quite touch.

He didn't care.

He let the magic go and grabbed Draco's chin in his hand, growling again in annoyance at the lack of a second one. He had to correct that soon, he thought muzzily. For now, his chest was hot and tight and felt smaller on the bottom than the top, and his thoughts leaped and careened and ran in strange directions, but the main center of them was always the same: proving Draco wrong.

He kissed Draco, more roughly than he'd ever dared to before, because he had always been afraid that if he did, he would hurt him, he was so much the stronger—

Except that that couldn't be true, because he wasn't afraid. And so he would kiss Draco hard and even bite him if he wanted, because Draco wasn't afraid of him, and he should be, and Harry wanted to show him just how wrong he was.

Draco moaned. Harry didn't think that was supposed to happen. He didn't have much time to think about it, though, because Draco, since he was no longer being pinned against the wall, had leaned forward, one hand in the center of Harry's chest, and shoved him backwards, and Harry went half-sprawling, and he rolled over and came up to one knee in the coins, because, damn it, he wasn't done.

He didn't use his magic to stop or slow Draco down as Draco sprang at him, though, because why should he? He didn't need to. He was going to show Draco that he was wrong, because any moment his training would kick in and push him away screaming, and that meant Draco would see that Harry really had struggled to overcome it and hadn't been able to.

He would be wrong.

Harry thought it was very important to remember that, so he clung to it even as the rest of his thoughts scattered like small startled birds, because Draco was straddling him, and Harry was gasping because he hadn't known the jut of hipbone digging into his belly could feel good. Then Draco leaned down and kissed him again, and Harry found out that he liked teeth clashing together, even when it was outside battle or Draco convincing him to go to the Sanctuary.

But any moment his training would hurt him and he would win anyway, so he felt it safe to kiss back, letting a flood of hot wetness that was certainly partly blood run through his mouth, and then roll over so that Draco dropped, shocked, onto the floor beside him. Harry reached out and raked the air with his fingers, and Draco's shirt and trousers parted into neat strips of cloth that fell to the floor. Draco blinked, looking entirely taken aback for a moment.

"Didn't think someone who was afraid would do that, did you?" Harry asked, and then his eyes took over from his mouth and he shut up for a moment. Draco actually looked...well, he looked much better than Harry had expected him to look for someone with the training he had, because, obviously, someone with the training he had couldn't expect to be normal and couldn't take a lover.

But he looked really, really good, and Harry found that he wanted to kiss Draco somewhere other than on the mouth. He crossed the floor between them while Draco was still blinking, and he didn't remember if he did it on hands and knees, or if he got up and ran. It didn't matter, because any moment the training would kick in.

He rolled to a stop beside Draco and fastened his mouth roughly on his chest, licking and biting again, and determined to find a place on Draco that would do what the place on his neck did to him. It was not fair that Draco knew about that place on his neck. Sensitive ears as revenge didn't really count, because everyone, practically, had sensitive ears.

Draco cried out abruptly when Harry licked one of his nipples, and Harry thought he'd found the place. But, really, just having something in his mouth didn't prove the point, because then he couldn't talk, so he swung a leg over Draco's hips and straddled him in turn, and

reached down to Draco's groin. That meant he removed his hand from Draco's chest and so couldn't hold him down anymore, but Harry thought he probably wouldn't want to move away. At least, if the way that Draco gasped and then twitched in his hand was any indication.

Harry hummed in satisfaction and stroked Draco more firmly. His magic was leaping around them in dizzying, twisted, brilliant patterns. Harry thought he saw it create a bolt of lightning out of the corner of his eye, and a pair of entwined figures who looked like him and Draco, but then he let most of his attention go back to what he was doing.

There was so much heat, engulfing heat like the second real kiss he'd shared with Draco, when he came out of the Maze in Lux Aeterna alive, as if they were standing in the middle of the summer sunlight. Harry could taste salt and sweetness in his mouth, and his head shone with fog and sun and fog and sun in alternating patterns, and he was rolling his own hips now, in motions that vaguely surprised him, because surely someone who'd had the training he'd had would not know how to do that.

He found himself pressing firmly against Draco, so firmly he hurt his own wrist where he was stroking Draco, pinning his hand between their bodies. And he regretted not having a second hand more than ever, because now Draco was writhing around and making noises. Harry quite liked the noises—even if half of them sounded like abbreviated versions of his own name and the other half were variations on Fuck—but the writhing made it difficult for him to keep doing what he wanted to do, which was stroke and pull and press down.

He should know to hold still, Harry thought, somewhere in the fog-dazzled confusion. I know how to hold still, and if I know how to do it, then he ought to know how to do it.

The sun broke through the fog again as Draco shuddered abruptly against him, and Harry felt his hand grow warmer. He blinked, and stared at Draco, and the way his face had gone slack with pleasure, his eyelids fluttering in regular contractions, his mouth gasping in air,

and he thought, Merlin, I made him feel that good? There was genuine wonder in his thoughts. Harry thought the wonder would last.

It didn't. He'd lifted his head from Draco's chest, and as if that had drawn Draco's attention, he opened his eyes and rolled Harry over with unexpected strength. Then Harry found himself with his trousers tugged open and then his pants, as if Draco didn't care about all the work he'd done that morning putting them on, and then a hand grabbed hold of him, and all the tightness and heat rushed from his lower chest to his groin, and wonder had a different meaning.

"Wish I had you naked," Draco snarled at him. "Should have, if you had done this like a normal person." Harry wondered what he was babbling on about as his head rolled back and he heard his breath coming in short, sharp gasps and his hair rasped against his cheeks and he found himself pressing his hips up in irregular jabs. "Saw you naked once already, though," Draco added inanely. "It'll have to do for now."

And on now he gave one hard tug, and Harry cried out as pleasure hit him like Light magic, rich and rolling and white-gold, and ripped him away from the world for at least a few moments.

He kept waiting for the training to appear. It never did.

He came back to himself slowly, with the sense that he needed to collect bits and pieces which had never broken free from him before. He found Draco sitting beside him, staring into his face.

He didn't look as if he'd lost, even though Harry had proven he wasn't afraid. He looked very much as if he'd won something instead. He was trying to be solemn, Harry thought, but a smirk tugged the corners of his mouth up.

And it hit Harry, then, what he'd done.

He shoved Draco, hard, with his hand and his magic. Draco went over backwards, which was happening a lot lately, and gave a wince when he landed. Harry guessed that he'd finally managed to notice they were rolling around on top of Black artifacts, something they'd

both ignored earlier. Harry thought he had a number of bruises and small cuts on his own back and hips.

He didn't care. He struggled against the lassitude in his muscles and the tangling of cloth around his legs, and snarled, "I know what you did."

"And you're angry?" Draco grinned at him.

Harry opened his mouth to snap back, then paused. Either way he went, he realized, Draco had won. Either he'd coaxed Harry into showing the anger he'd been holding back on, or he was proving that he was right about Harry being unwilling to express his anger.

"Damn it!" Harry shouted, and scrambled away. He didn't even know how he felt anymore. He should be angry at Draco for manipulating him, he knew that, and part of him was, but when he looked over at the cauldron of brewing potion and *Medicamenta Meatus Verus*, he wondered what the hell he'd been thinking. Draco had reacted to stupidity with provocation, the way Harry himself had done with Snape. And he should be angry at Draco for lying to him, but Draco wouldn't repent for that. He'd always cared less about it than Harry had, and in the tradition of accepting allies with different morals than he had, he couldn't insist that Draco change.

And Draco had made him feel so good, even if what he felt right now was mostly messy and sticky. He closed his eyes and shook his head. The little cuts and bruises ached now. The cooling liquid on his leg felt disgusting. The memory of how he'd refused to hold back anything, his magic or his rawer instincts, was enough to make him worry for what could have happened.

But he mostly wanted to feel that pleasure again.

"Damn it!" he yelled again.

Draco chuckled.

Harry opened his eyes and glared at him. Nearly naked, his pants darkly splotched, his blond hair going every which way and his face sweaty and pink, Draco had still won.

"I grant you that one," Harry said, knowing he should sound more upset, and not let afterglow infuse his voice. "And I'll copy down the recipe and then return the book to Snape."

Draco nodded, clearly pleased.

Harry sighed. Maybe he should be angrier, but he wasn't. And if he wasn't angrier, then maybe—

Maybe no one has the right to tell me I should be angrier.

That was a new thought. Harry had spent so much time trying to learn how to be normal and to see what he missed because of his training that he hadn't considered that some of his own, non-normal reactions might be all right.

He stood, slowly, and cast a cleaning spell that left him considerably less sticky than before, then pulled his pants up. He looked over at Draco, and found his eyes lingering on him. Harry blushed.

"And now he blushes," Draco said, as if making the observation to a third person, unseen.

Harry shook his head, and leaned against the wall, trying to work out how he felt other than dizzy and angry and relaxed and good and—

And happy.

Chapter Sixteen: Another Visit to the Ministry

“Because I thought you needed someone to help you.”

Snape leaned forward across the kitchen table. Harry simply watched him. He was grateful that there were other people in the room: Trumpetflower, studiously reading the Prophet and pretending the argument wasn't happening; Rose, watering a plant she'd bought on her trip to Muggle London; Connor, trying to describe hippocampi in a letter to Parvati. It reminded Harry that other people could see his emotions, if he let them escape his control. He did not let his hand tremble on the cup of tea. He didn't let himself put down the cup of tea and reach out to Snape.

He's suffering enough already. If he doesn't care about embarrassing himself, that's one thing. But I won't mortify him in front of others.

“I do not need the Seer,” Snape hissed.

Harry wondered, distantly, if this was what it had been like for Snape and Draco, when they thought he needed healing and he insisted he didn't. But no frustration gripped his chest, the way it seemed to have happened with them. All he felt was a general weariness, with determination like sliding stone under that.

“Joseph agreed to come,” said Harry quietly. “He has as much right to be at Cobley-by-the-Sea as you do. I can't force you to talk to him. You asked me why I invited him. I answered. That's all.”

“As much right as I do?” Snape's face had gone white, leaving his eyes like staring black coals. “So I am only as welcome a guest in your house as others are?”

Harry could feel the listening silence become listening silence. Trumpetflower no longer turned the pages of the paper. Rose's murmuring to the plant, which was withering in the sea air, had gone silent. Connor held as still as if someone had just summoned a thestral.

Harry had already decided on his response to things like this, or he might have sat there and flushed. As it was, he felt dull heat creeping up his cheeks, but he simply drained the last swallow of his tea, walked over to the counter, and began running the water to clean the cup. He was getting better with cleaning charms, but water still worked the best.

"You did not answer my question," Snape said to his back, his voice betrayed.

That's because I was close to saying something I would regret. Harry reminded himself again that Snape was suffering. The dreams were taking their toll on him nightly, but, judging from his reaction to what Harry had said about his mother, he was definitely not in the mood to discuss them with anyone else. He needed to know that Harry wouldn't give up on him, but he didn't need poking and prodding. Harry would walk away when he got angry.

"Most people are welcome in Copley-by-the-Sea," he said, when he knew that he could keep his tone even. "People who swear to the Alliance. People who don't, and who might be looking to become part of the Alliance. People who need my protection, and wish to claim it." He turned around, bracing his hand on the counter behind him, and looked up at Snape. "People whom I love."

"You did not answer my question," Snape repeated.

Harry shut his eyes and turned away. Snape was a Legilimens, and still more skilled at that than Harry was himself. He would see the rage if Harry met his gaze much longer. He might already have noticed the small leak of magic that made Harry's cup tremble.

He left, walking upstairs to the bedroom he now shared with Draco. Draco was still asleep, though—the only reason Harry had eaten breakfast without him—so he leaned against the wall and took several deep breaths, counting to ten in Mermish, an old distraction technique Lily had taught him.

When he finished, he had returned to a much calmer state, and told himself, again, that Snape was suffering, but didn't want to talk about

his suffering. Joseph was in the same house with him now, calm and patient, and not engaged with as many different tasks as Harry was. Harry hoped he could delegate the actual handling of Snape to him, since Snape had made it clear how unwelcome his ward's inquiries were. Joseph would not give up.

He pushed open the door. Draco sighed and rolled over, then abruptly sat up, as if missing Harry's warmth in the bed, and blinked at him. A moment later, he snorted.

"Went to breakfast without me?"

Harry felt his face relax into a grin, almost against his will. "Did lots of things without you," he agreed in an appropriately solemn tone. "Woke up, breathed, showered, ate breakfast."

"I might have shared in the shower, at least." Draco's voice was low and teasing in a way Harry had never heard it before. He flushed, but he didn't think it was as much as he would have at one point. He shook his head in wonder. Trust this to be the most comfortable bond I have at this point, rather than the most awkward.

"True," Harry said. Draco's eyes brightened, and Harry laughed at him. "But since sex appears to drive most other thoughts out of your head, I did want to know what you were mumbling about last night. Something about Unspeakables and a paper?"

"Yes." Draco leaned forward, obviously trying not to just eye Harry's chest, covered by a shirt though it was. Harry sat down on the bed to make it easier for Draco to focus on his face. Draco blinked and did so. "The Minister still hasn't contacted you?"

Harry shook his head. "No. And Fred and George seemed convinced that no one could detect the messages they passed to Percy. They were sending them disguised as pranks. Anyone who asks will think Fred and George just don't like their brother."

“Then I think he’s either not going to say anything to you about the Unspeakables, or the Unspeakables themselves are interfering,” said Draco decisively.

Harry frowned. “You don’t know that.”

Draco gave him a pitying glance. “Harry, don’t you know anything? In politics, there’s no such thing as an innocent silence. You hadn’t had any post from the Minister at all, and given what you said happened to you in his Ministry, you should have. Certainly he wouldn’t approve of his own employees attacking you. And if he didn’t believe you at all, he should have demanded an apology. The story is spreading now; I received an owl from Mother yesterday that said she heard of it among people who weren’t at your festival. So he should have responded, and he hasn’t. I think someone’s interfering with his letters. And yours.”

Harry gnawed his lip. “And you think I should draw him out somehow? But if the Unspeakables are really interfering, how? They can stop information from reaching him in the Ministry far more easily than I can convey it.”

“Do something that he won’t have any choice but to respond to,” Draco said. “Write an article about the attack under your own name.”

Harry nodded slowly. “And you think the Prophet would print that?”

Draco raised his eyebrows. “Who said anything about the Prophet? I was thinking of sending it to the Vox Populi, Harry.”

“That wouldn’t work. No one would believe anything that anyone said in there,” Harry said in disgust.

Draco gave a little half-smile. “You’d be surprised. Besides, if your name appears with the article, then it would be a simple matter for you to disavow it if it really wasn’t yours. But claiming it? I think that will make a difference. And you heard Hornblower babbling on. He’d be glad to do you the favor.”

“Maybe,” said Harry, still unconvinced. “Why would that draw the Minister into responding where nothing else would, though?”

“Because, so far, no name has appeared, and the Prophet hasn’t carried a story about it,” said Draco. “And because he knows that you’d be protesting if your name was used without your permission—no matter how many people decided to disbelieve you. Your name appears, you support it, and he’ll know that it’s either true or the person who wrote the article has your permission. I think either would worry him, given what power the Boy-Who-Lived can command. So he’ll contact you.”

“At the least, I suppose it would make an interesting experiment to see what he does when an article like that gets published,” Harry said slowly.

Draco gave him a feral smile. “Exactly.”

“Right then,” said Harry, and leaned forward to clap Draco on the shoulder. “I’ll write it. Want to give me a hand?”

This time, he was the one who blushed, in the face of Draco’s delighted laughter.

Harry blinked when a gray-and-black-spotted owl hurtled through the window of Copley-by-the-Sea that very evening. He had thought Hornblower would take some time to read his article and get back to him; he must have articles pouring in every day, judging by how thick the *Vox Populi* was. But this owl had arrived just a few hours after he sent Hedwig off.

The owl extended her leg impatiently. Harry removed the message. It was brief enough, thanking him for the truth and for letting his voice be heard, and containing a payment of seventeen Sickles. Harry smiled and poured the money through his fingers, feeling oddly proud. It was the first money he had ever earned by simply doing something that wasn’t magical. The power of his name was undoubtedly why Hornblower had agreed to print the article so fast, but that didn’t matter. He had still earned this.

“It’ll be out in tomorrow’s paper?” Draco asked, leaning down to peer over his shoulder.

Harry nodded. “And, as you said, the Minister’s response will be very interesting,” he murmured. He was growing more and more concerned. Fred and George had owled him earlier, insisting that they had sent several messages to Percy, with codes that no one except those who were members of the Weasley family could have figured out, and had yet to receive an answer.

I doubt the Unspeakables can control all the ways this article can reach him, though, even if they are watching Percy’s correspondence and the Prophet. People will talk about this even if Scrimgeour thinks the Populi is nothing more than rubbish.

Your move, Minister.

Rufus sighed and sat down slowly at his desk. It was only seven-o’clock, and he’d been in the Ministry for two hours already. He’d spent an hour and a half of that arguing against giving the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts new powers. He’d had unexpected support from the Head of the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, who didn’t like the new Department edging in on territory that Department nominally controlled, and still Amelia had almost won.

Every time he needed a reminder of how thin the ice he walked on was, someone was sure to provide three.

He reached for his teacup, and then an owl hurtled through his wards as if they weren’t there and landed on his desk. Old Auror instincts had Rufus leveling his wand before he thought. The owl didn’t move, though, simply sat still and ruffled her feathers. Then she gave him an irritated look, as much to demand where the owl treats and the admiration for her were already.

Rufus narrowed his eyes. “Deprendo,” he said.

A mist of blue wavered up from the owl’s feathers in answer. Yes, she was a magical construct, which explained how she had passed the wards, but didn’t explain where she was from. The gray feathers with

black spots looked vaguely familiar, but Rufus couldn't imagine what the pattern signified.

He noticed that she carried a thick coil of paper. Either it was a newspaper or a wrapping of many papers around a threatening missive. Rufus didn't laugh. It could be a Howler, but he had received worse things since he became Minister.

He cast Dependo on the newspaper, too, but that was normal. Still, someone could have woven the newspaper with a hidden hex. He floated it off the owl's leg and spread it out in front of him, one hand ready to flick down in the motion that would call the wards to his defense.

Nothing happened, though. The newspaper unfolded, and Rufus could see the title and the dancing Maenads on either side of it. He grimaced. He'd heard of the Vox Populi—he had some of his own private spies, of course, who informed him the instant anything likely to cause enormous changes appeared in public—but he hadn't thought Hornblower would dare to deliver a paper directly to him.

Then he saw the headline.

Boy-Who-Lived Confirms Unspeakable Attack.

By: Harry

Rufus shook his head numbly. This—wasn't true. The Vox Populi had used Harry's name without his permission, and he would be angry when he heard. It might even break the cold silence with which he'd answered every piece of correspondence that Rufus used to try and reach him.

Nevertheless, he leaned forward and read the article, fascinated to learn what this unknown writer would dare to say. It was in first-person, presumably to maintain the illusion that such a thing had really happened, and ensnare those otherwise rational people who would believe that no one but Harry could know all the details of such a thing.

I visited the Ministry on August 8th, in order to try and gain information on the anti-werewolf laws the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts has passed. I ended up stumbling unexpectedly into a trap much deeper than I had believed any were laid. An Unspeakable pursued me out of the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures. He had a collar in his hand. I believe he was planning to capture me.

I had wrapped myself in a spell of my own creation which kept him from finding me in the lift we rode together, but he stood in the doors of the lift when they opened and held the collar towards my neck. I became visible long enough to call for help and duck under his arm. However, I quickly realized that the only person left in the Atrium who wasn't an Unspeakable was the checkpoint witch on the gates. When I called, she came running, but otherwise only Unspeakables closed in.

I protected Erica when one of the Unspeakables would have grabbed her, erasing the hand of the one who did so.

Rufus heard the paper crumple, and realized he'd reached out and gripped the side, nearly shredding it. He swallowed and eased his grasp as much as he could, so that he could continue reading the article. But his heart was beating much too fast, and his breathing was erratic, and he wanted nothing so much as to firecall Harry—assuming he knew where Harry was—and shout at him.

He used magic in the Ministry. He used magic against my people.

He had known that, of course, from hearing what the Unspeakables told him, and from what they confirmed of a spell placed on Aurelius Flint, but hearing about it secondhand and reading Harry's own not-even-apologetic account of it were different things.

Then Rufus shook his head. He'd fallen into the trap. Harry hadn't written the article. Someone posing as him had. But he would definitely have to speak to Harry, and soon, so they could correct this misconception that might seriously hinder the ability of the Department of Mysteries to continue working.

He went on reading anyway, his eyes sliding down the words in fascination.

Erica and I then ran for the lift that would transport us back to the entrance of the Ministry. There were Unspeakables ahead of us as well as behind us, however. One of them flung a Still-Beetle shell at me. The shell contains the magic of a Lord-level wizard, and would have frozen me to the ground, unless it was spelled to work as a Portkey. Then it would have transferred me into a cell where the Unspeakables, doubtless, could examine me at their leisure.

Rufus frowned. If that was true...

But it wasn't true. It was an article written by someone posing as Harry, in a newspaper that would turn to rubbish, just like everything Hornblower touched did. And if there was the slightest hint of truth to this, then the Unspeakables who had attacked Harry were the same ones who had frightened Amelia. No one could say who they were or what they wanted yet. It was best to let their colleagues study and handle them, rather than blame the whole Department of Mysteries for something a few of them had done. Rufus knew Harry understood that. He had insisted that not all werewolves be blamed for the actions of one pack.

More proof that this article-writer is not him, Rufus thought, and continued to read.

I used fire to destroy the Still-Beetle shell before it hit me. The Unspeakable who had flung the shell had a ring that absorbed the fire, however, so it did not harm him. He next cast a small glass globe that appeared to contain a rose, and rang with the magic of time. I swallowed the magic, and broke the globe harmlessly. I do not know what it would have done, but I believe it was another attempt to capture me. After this, I locked my eyes on the Unspeakable and told him to move.

He did, and Erica and I made it to the lift. However, the Unspeakable dipped his fingers into what looked remarkably like a Pensieve filled with blue liquid instead of silver, and spoke the single word,

“Obliviate.” Though the liquid splashed on the floor far below the lift, it still took Erica’s memory of the event.

I felt the compulsion to forget clawing at my own mind, but my will was strong enough to throw it off. I am not sure if the Unspeakables believed that I had forgotten as well, or if they were content to let me go because they believed I could do nothing against them.

I can and will do something against them. I have created multiple records of this event, including Pensieve memories placed in the basin no later than fifteen minutes after the chase was done. I have shown these memories to those who attended a certain festival marking me as Black heir, but I will show them to anyone who wishes to see. If someone owls me with a certain public time and place, I will arrive, carrying the basin with me.

Their greatest weapon is secrecy, and the terror of secrecy—altered memories, unknowable artifacts, the threat of vanishing into silence and never coming out again. If we destroy those shadows, they must face us in the light.

Rufus was almost light-headed with relief by the time he finished. The unknown article-writer had gone too far. He’d made claims that would be impossible to back up. The moment someone asked to see the Pensieve of memories of the attack, Harry would ask what he was talking about, and that would be the end of that.

On the other hand, the last lines concerned Rufus. Someone attacking the Unspeakables because they practiced secrecy, and prying into the shadows around them, would make it impossible for them to function. Rufus knew that most of them were loyal; the Stone that chose them made certain of that. Because a few had somehow managed to turn traitor was no reason for the rest to suffer.

What would make it worse was if Hornblower were to take it into his head to dig through the shadows. Rufus had encountered the man before, in the service of one fringe cause after another, though it had been three years since the last time he had really moved. Hornblower believed himself responsible to no one and nothing but the principles

he had adopted this month. He was like a terrier, too, and never let go as long as there was something to be worried at.

Rufus looked thoughtfully at the magical owl, which still sat preening itself on his desk. "Can you carry a message for me?" he asked.

The owl looked up and hooted at him.

Harry had ignored all his owls so far, Rufus thought, as he reached for ink and parchment. But he wouldn't ignore this one, not when he saw the message Rufus had sent. It was simple—the false article torn free of the *Vox Populi* and wrapped in an envelope, along with a piece of parchment that said simply, We need to talk.

"I am glad you listened to sense," Draco said, as he flicked a mote of dust from a sleeve Harry did not believe actually had dust on it.

"I try," Harry muttered. He'd had a short argument with Draco first, of course, because he had feared that going into the Ministry with too large an entourage—an entourage that included werewolves—would smell of intimidation to Scrimgeour. But Draco had pointed out that the last two times he'd been in the Ministry, someone had attempted to kill or capture him. Harry had said that more people around him wouldn't prevent that, and besides, he would feel compelled to defend them all.

Draco had looked at him until Harry admitted that most of those he would take along were capable of defending themselves, and that, apart from a few communication spells to ask Hawthorn, Adalrico, Peter, and Narcissa if they would mind coming with him, was that.

They stepped out of the lift and moved towards the Minister's office. Harry hadn't replied to Scrimgeour's owl; he'd simply appeared, and deliberately brought along people who wouldn't mind waiting hours if Scrimgeour couldn't see him right away. He didn't want any more post intercepted by silent enemies he was sure, now, must be the Unspeakables. There was no one else who would have both the interest and the undetectable methods to keep Percy from contacting his brothers, or to isolate the Minister and Harry from one another.

Harry turned the corner into the final hallway that led to the office, and saw Wilmot, as well as an Auror he didn't know, guarding Scrimgeour's door. They straightened at the sight of him. Harry gave a soft snort. He didn't believe they hadn't known he was coming. Messages had presumably raced through the Ministry the moment Harry came in with twenty people surrounding him.

"The Minister has visitors," said the Auror Harry didn't know, a small, prim woman whose severe hair and brown eyes reminded him of Vera. Vera, of course, had never looked that unsympathetic, or had that tight a grip on her wand.

"We'll wait," said Harry politely.

"On what?" the Auror demanded.

Adalrico was already taking several small objects out of his pocket—crumpled pieces of parchment and crumbs, mostly—and Transfiguring them into chairs. One was large, elaborate, draped with banners of silver and green, and took up half the hallway. Harry winced a bit, but he sat down when Adalrico elaborately bowed him towards it, sneaking a glance at the Auror. The look on her face was priceless.

"On these," Harry said, and noticed that the other chairs Adalrico had Transfigured, he gave to the werewolves. He felt a wave of warmth that burned up the embarrassment of a few moments before. If anyone walked past and noticed that the people sitting down, except for Harry, had amber eyes, while the pureblood wizards remained on their feet, that should tell them where this particular delegation stood.

"And how long do you intend to wait?" The Auror had recovered herself quickly, Harry had to give her that. Her hold on her wand had increased, though, to the point where her knuckles were the color of milk.

Harry shrugged. "Until the Minister is done speaking with his other visitors. I didn't tell him I was coming, so of course I didn't have an appointment."

The Auror stared. Harry ignored her, and turned to Narcissa, who was examining the size of the hallway with a cool, appraising gaze. Harry smiled. "Not as big as the entrance hall in Malfoy Manor?"

"Truly," Narcissa murmured, "if things had been different, Lucius might have been Minister. I was estimating the number of ways this hallway could be improved. There are not many. The Ministry has always been grim." She cocked her head to the side, and a faint smile touched her lips. "Grim would suit Lucius, but he would demand an environment more imposing, I'm sure."

Harry snorted. Lucius was supposedly working on a very important project at which he couldn't be disturbed. If it was anything like his other important projects, it would end in a few months and never be spoken of again.

He glanced up as he realized someone was missing. Narcissa still examined the walls. Adalrico had Transfigured his last chair and stepped back with a flourish. Hawthorn, wearing a slight glamour charm that made her eyes appear hazel instead of hazel-tinted amber, was quietly speaking with one of the werewolves about Wolfsbane. The rest of the pack lounged on chairs as if they couldn't believe their luck. And Draco had moved up to stand at the arm of Harry's seat.

Harry frowned. Where's Peter?

He saw a flash of gray along the wall near the Aurors' feet, and sighed. Peter had slipped into rat form and gone ahead. Harry knew he had to trust him to take care of himself—that was something he really needed to learn—but he couldn't help thinking the Minister's office might have wards on it that would imprison or hurt Animagi. His hand absently rubbed the stump of his left wrist.

Wilmot and the suspicious Auror showed no sign of noticing that something was wrong, and shortly, because he was looking for it and for no other reason, Harry saw the small gray shape returning. Peter slid round the far corner behind Adalrico and then came strolling back a moment later, as though he had arrived to join the group late.

His eyes found Harry's, and he mouthed a single word.

Gray.

Harry hissed beneath his breath. That meant Unspeakables were in Scrimgeour's office right now, dressed in gray cloaks.

He swallowed his anger and agitation. He had expected this might happen, after all; Unspeakables were stopping Scrimgeour's post. He was here, and if the Unspeakables attacked him here, they were going to face much more serious opposition than they had when he was alone or only with Erica. He forced his hand to relax and his magic, which had been rising around him, to sink back into silence, folded around him like cloth. He reminded himself to thank Snape for teaching him Occlumency, again; it helped him weight and sink his emotions, and it might be a tiny positive thing that would help rebuild the trust that had broken between them again with Harry's comments about Snape's mother.

Draco's hand tightened on his shoulder. "Unspeakables are here?" he breathed, so softly that the Aurors on Scrimgeour's door had no chance of hearing. Harry wondered if the wards he suspected the Unspeakables had strung throughout the Ministry would listen in, however.

"Yes, they are," said Harry.

Draco said nothing. He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes instead. Then his hand fell limp on Harry's shoulder.

Harry restrained his agitation again. Draco had gone hunting with his possession gift. He was doing what Harry had asked of him. Harry could not, and would not, interfere, no matter how worried he was for Draco's safety in the minds of people who had things like the Obliviate Pensieve. He sat still and relaxed, and watched the bag that hung casually off Camellia's left shoulder.

Draco tapped his fingers on the side of Harry's neck much sooner than Harry would have expected. "Two of them in there," Draco murmured, again barely moving his lips. "Just telling the Minister that they know some of their own attacked you, but those are renegades

from the rest of the Department of Mysteries, and what they need is undisturbed time to investigate the matter within their own ranks. They're having to work hard to convince him," he added. "I think Scrimgeour thought the article was entirely false."

Harry glanced at the bag hanging from Camellia's shoulder again. It contained Snape's Pensieve, and the memories. Draco followed his gaze, and a strangely feral expression overcame his face. Harry thought he'd seen the same expression in the eyes of wolves hunting deer.

Then he was trying to remember where he had seen pictures of wolves hunting deer, and thus missed Scrimgeour's door opening.

"The Minister will see you now," Wilmot announced a moment later, and Harry saw a flash of red hair disappearing back into the office; Percy must have come out and told him.

Harry rose, darting a glance at Draco. Draco grimaced and shook his head, eyes saying clearly that if the Unspeakables hadn't come out of the office, then Harry shouldn't enter it.

Harry shrugged back. If the Unspeakables attacked him in front of the Minister, he had no compunctions about using his magic to defend himself. And he didn't think Percy and Scrimgeour would try to lure him into a trap, which meant the Unspeakables had probably gone out a different way.

Draco hesitated, then nodded, but positioned himself at Harry's right shoulder. Harry had no objection to that.

Wilmot and the other Auror crossed their wands, though Wilmot looked regretful about it. "You're the only person whom the Minister wants to speak with, Harry," Wilmot said.

Harry spent a moment looking into his eyes. Wilmot turned his head just slightly aside, as most of the werewolves tended to do when fixed with a challenging stare. Harry didn't think he was treacherous.

He took Draco's hand and squeezed his wrist, hard, then cast a nonverbal Summoning Charm. The bag on Camellia's shoulder flipped open, and the Pensieve skimmed out and towards him. The female Auror jerked and shot a Stupefy at the Pensieve that Harry made it duck so as to miss.

"Nervous?" Harry asked.

"I wonder why?" Draco asked, giving the words a particularly nasty twist that Harry knew he must have learned from his father.

"You can't take that in there," the female Auror told him, as the Pensieve settled into Harry's arms.

Harry raised his eyebrows. When they push this far, it's time to push back. "I've been attacked twice in the Ministry," he said pleasantly. "I've agreed to enter the Minister's office without anyone at my back. Unless the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Magical Artifacts That Look Just Like Pensieves has passed a new edict barring them from the Minister's office, I am going to take this inside so that he can see the memories of the second attack."

"You can't," the female Auror repeated stubbornly, but Scrimgeour's voice came from inside, firm and final.

"Let him in, Hope."

Hope gave Harry a look that said, "This isn't over." Harry gave her one back that he wanted to say, "Of course it isn't, you're still alive," and then passed her. He thought she recoiled. He didn't care enough to keep watching her, though.

Scrimgeour still sat behind his desk, the way he always had. A cup of tea stood near at hand, and in front of him was spread the copy of the Vox Populi that Harry supposed he had ripped the article out of. Or, no, actually, he realized as he came nearer. This one was whole, with the article he'd written on the front page.

"Harry," said Scrimgeour, voice distant and neutral.

The Unspeakables did get to him first, Harry thought, but he was feeling unnaturally calm, rather than angry. He'd started thinking this morning, and each new "precaution"—the people here and talking to Scrimgeour, that the Minister seemed to disbelieve in his account of the attack altogether, the fact that he had a reason to think he was in danger in the Ministry and still had to leave all his friends behind—just tipped his thinking more and more in this new direction. Scrimgeour was acting as if he didn't care what happened to Harry; the Ministry, and its people, were more important.

I'm sure they are, to him. But I no longer need to bend over backwards to accommodate every little sensitivity he has, if he won't show me a moment's consideration.

"Minister," he said, and sat down in the chair across from Scrimgeour. He could feel Percy Weasley's intent gaze from the desk behind Scrimgeour's, concealed under a ward. He subdued another rise of irritation, but let the words accompanying the emotion through. If he has to have protection every moment of the day, why should I be treated any differently? I know there are people who want me dead, even if some of them are blind and wounded right now.

"I know the article is false," Scrimgeour started. "I summoned you to discuss who you thought might have the gall to do this using your name."

Harry half-lidded his eyes and drowned his temper in another Occlumency pool. "There is no trick, Minister," he said. "I wrote that article."

Scrimgeour's face tightened. Then he said, "And I suppose that you'll tell me the memories are in that Pensieve?" He nodded to it.

"Yes. So you can see it for yourself." Harry braced the heavy basin with his left arm and held it out. It sloshed, nearly sending some of the silver liquid over the rim. Harry frowned. I want a second hand.

Scrimgeour rapped his fingers on the desk for a long moment. Then he said, "If you say the attack happened, Harry, I believe you. But that leaves two things for us to discuss." He leaned forward earnestly.

“First of all, you don’t know who the Unspeakables who attacked you are. There’s reason to think a division in the Department of Mysteries has split them into two factions, or even more. The ones who attacked you were those who do want to see stricter anti-werewolf laws passed. But that doesn’t mean tarring all Unspeakables with the same brush is a good thing, as you did in this article. That hinders the ability of the loyalists to do their job, and sends the ones who did commit crimes scuttling even deeper into their holes.”

Harry imagined his mind flooding with cool, calm silver, to hold back the frustration. “And where did you hear about this division, Minister?”

Scrimgeour shook his head. “I can’t tell you that.”

Unspeakables, then. Poisoning the well. “I couldn’t see the faces of the ones who attacked me,” said Harry intently. “Unless you can suggest some way to separate the traitors from the loyalists, I have no reason to retract what I said.” He paused, then added, “I notice the Department of Mysteries didn’t come forward to denounce what some of their members had done.”

“It’s complicated, Harry,” Scrimgeour said. “I don’t understand the full story myself, but I don’t think anyone does. The Department will investigate it. I will ask you not to stir the pot further.”

Harry smiled thinly. “I can’t promise that, Minister. I stir the pot just by existing.”

Scrimgeour took a deep breath, and his bad leg moved in a spasm, as though it hurt. Harry thought he was holding back frustration of his own. “The second thing,” he said, “is that you used magic against employees of the Ministry.”

Harry blinked for a moment, then said, “Who were trying to capture me.”

“You’re still a Lord-level wizard,” said Scrimgeour. “And you’re an absorbere. It’s magic that others can’t do. You know how I feel about that. Much as I felt about Dumbledore compelling my people, in fact.”

“I saved one of your employees, though I couldn’t save her memory,” Harry said. “Doesn’t that matter to you?”

“She’s welcome to return to work at any time,” Scrimgeour said. “The word I received was that she didn’t come to work for several days, they couldn’t contact her, and she’s been sacked.”

“They couldn’t contact her because she fled from her flat,” said Harry. “In expectation that Unspeakables would come after her.”

“Tell me where she is now, then, and I’ll tell—“

“I’m not going to tell you that,” said Harry softly. Not when you had Unspeakables in your office, and they’re probably listening to us right now. “She’s mine to protect.”

“Listen, Harry,” Scrimgeour said. “The Department of Mysteries can’t just reveal their secrets like that. The Stone chooses ‘em for loyalty, and that’s important. Even the traitors are acting in accordance with the Stone’s wishes, though they’ve misinterpreted ‘em somehow. I can’t destroy an entire Ministry Department because it houses a few of my employees who haven’t behaved as they should, and I can’t order a full investigation when it would endanger the security of the British wizarding world.”

“I understand,” Harry said. “Likewise, I can’t let people who turn to me for protection be hurt and do nothing about it, and when attacked I will defend myself.”

Scrimgeour grimaced as if he’d swallowed a lemon whole. “I am asking,” he said, “that you make a public statement acknowledging that there are some mistakes in your account, and that you leave the Department of Mysteries to punish its own, rather than dragging them into the light, as you put it in your article.”

Harry tilted his head. “You fear the power of my name, don’t you?”

“As you said, you stir the pot just by existing,” said Scrimgeour. “And they’re trying to find ‘em, Harry—the traitors, I mean. But they don’t need this. Not now. And not from the Boy-Who-Lived.”

"I said I would use what power my reputation and my magic could give me, Minister," Harry said calmly. "And I am."

Scrimgeour stared at him incredulously. "So you won't even give them a chance to solve this on their own?"

"If they had come to me themselves and explained the nature and manner of the problem?" Harry laughed. "Of course I would. As matters stand, I have only your word—and, I suppose, theirs—that the division exists at all. For all I know, the whole Department of Mysteries does want to capture me, and those who came after me were following the Stone's orders. That doesn't even touch what they want with the werewolves. I won't yield on this, sir."

Scrimgeour closed his eyes and bowed his head. "That makes matters harder than you know," he said in a strained voice.

"Why?"

"I cannot tell you that." Scrimgeour refused to look at him.

Harry raised an eyebrow and stood. "Well. It seems that our communication problem isn't going to be resolved after all. Good day, Minister." He turned for the door.

"Harry. Wait."

Scrimgeour had been one of his most trusted allies at one point—or, if not an ally, a leader Harry could trust to defend his people—so he turned around. Scrimgeour had a hand extended to him, and the expression of pleading on his face made Harry's heart give a painful lurch.

"You are vates," Scrimgeour said. "Surely you can respect the free will of the Ministry employees in this matter? Surely you can give the Department of Mysteries a few more days?"

Harry shook his head. "Their free will extends until the border at which they attack me," he said quietly. "And I no longer make

excuses for my enemies, Minister, any more than I doubt the abilities of my friends to fight. It's insulting to do that, really. If someone tries to collar me or tells me that he wants to bring me to trial for the death of his child, I believe him."

He turned away and stepped out through the door, brushing past Hope, who still stared at him suspiciously. Wilmot's gaze, by contrast, was appealing.

Harry didn't meet it. He wasn't Wilmot's alpha, and though he admired the man's courage to walk above the abyss that the Ministry had become for werewolves and still somehow hold his job, he couldn't spare Wilmot the agony of decision. The Minister seemed determined to trust the Department of Mysteries. Harry would not

He scanned his people carefully, meeting pair after pair of eyes, and murmuring spells that should let him detect any magic placed on them. He sensed nothing. Harry relaxed a little.

"Nothing strange happened?" he asked.

Draco, who'd taken a sharp step forward when he saw Harry and then controlled himself as if he didn't want anyone to think badly of a Malfoy's self-control, shook his head.

"Good," Harry said, and led the way back towards the Atrium. He was worried enough to want to Apparate them straight home from the corridor, but he couldn't without tearing through the Ministry's anti-Apparition wards and essentially poking Scrimgeour in the eye. He had no grudge against the Minister, or the other innocents whom the wards protected.

Besides, he didn't want to seem afraid, despite his failure to convince Scrimgeour to trust him above the Unspeakables.

I will not let them make me afraid.

He remembered, abruptly, the news he'd intended to warn Scrimgeour about, to prepare him. He hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. It wasn't news that directly affected the Ministry, and

everyone would find out the truth in a few days, anyway. Scrimgeour could wait and read it on the front page of the Prophet.

I wanted to warn him to prepare for chaos. But chaos is what's coming, no matter how he tries to stall it, and I don't want to warn the Unspeakables.

Let's see what they do when Thomas's storm spreads its wings.

Chapter Seventeen: Dancing Above the Abyss

Thomas smiled as he admired the front page of the Daily Prophet. He and his people might almost have written the article. They hadn't, of course, because there was just too much to say and they could never have chosen what would go in such a short piece of writing. Rita Skeeter had studied their report instead, asked intelligent questions, and written the article.

He loved the photograph, though. It showed him holding up a copy of the thick, bound Report on The Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Magic. They had chosen that title, in the end, over the probably more accurate Report on The Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Wizarding Magic. Thomas was happy about what he'd learned from talking with the centaurs in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. Their magic did seem to run on the same lines as most wizardry, and so he'd not insisted that the title of the report had to change.

The headline was intriguing, too, sure to get attention and make the readers see that they owed an allegiance to the truth, whatever their personal prejudices.

PURE BLOOD NOT SO MAGICAL AFTER ALL

Grand Unified Theory Suggests Differences Between Muggleborns and Others 'Insignificant'

Thomas hummed under his breath as he read the opening of the article.

An international team of research wizards—whose members include the Chinese Light Lady Jing-Xi and the British wizard Thomas Rhangnara, husband of Head Auror Priscilla Burke—today published their Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Magic, a project on which they have been working for decades. The Grand Unified Theory draws some surprising conclusions, including that other factors have far more influence on a wizard's magic than blood.

"It's something obvious to anyone who looks, of course," Rhangnara said. "After all, the most pureblooded families produce Squibs, and

how could Muggleborns occur at all if all witches and wizards must have one magical parent?"

He rejected, along with the Russian research wizard Ilya Petrovitch, the ancient notion that all Muggleborns are descended from halfblood marriages or from Squibs exiled into the Muggle world.

"The research simply doesn't support that interpretation," Petrovitch said, via translator, from a firecall yesterday. "There are many factors that work together, and while genetic heritage is one of them, the most important appears to be the choice of the magic. Sometimes it chooses non-purebloods to wield it. Sometimes it doesn't choose the children of purebloods. Magic is more sentient than we always thought, and far more interesting."

Asked what some of the other factors that influence magical birth would be, Rhangnara listed them without pausing: the mother's will for the child in her womb (why, he said, the children of raped witches are almost always Squibs); where one lives (some of the first admitted Muggleborns in the British Isles came from places hallowed by druids); and weather the day one is born (thunderstorms produce more witches than wizards). He has obviously studied this in detail, and just as obviously loves the work.

"There's so much that goes on that we haven't acknowledged," Rhangnara said. "More, there's so much that goes on that we can't control. The old methods to 'insure' the birth of magical children almost always focus on blood. Even in the old days before the International Statute, when wizards and Muggles lived side by side and they knew about us, wizards were encouraged to intermarry with their own kind first and foremost. But it's not nearly that simple. We have a wonderful culture that calls itself pureblood, full of rituals and ceremonies and beliefs that are a legitimate heritage. But that has next to nothing to do with blood. After all, Muggleborns can learn to be part of that culture, too, and many have."

He named the old Dark Lord Fallen as an example; though he claimed to be a bastard son of the Prince pureblood line, he was in fact a Muggleborn.

“We have a tendency to rewrite our own history,” he added. “So when someone says that there’s never been a Muggleborn Lord, I’ve learned that, in fact, there often has been, but wizards—or the Lord himself—would prefer people to forget it. And the same thing happens with ancestry. Pureblood families will claim they’ve always intermarried with wizards, and sometimes, that’s even true. But, most of the time, it’s not.” The Malfoys and the Blacks, he said, are examples of families with recent Muggleborn ancestry. By his estimation, Abraxas Malfoy, father of the current scion, Lucius, displayed the classic signs of a powerful halfblood wizard.

Thomas frowned. He had said more at that point, but for some reason, Skeeter had summarized and skimmed a lot of it. He wondered why. It was all interesting.

Rhangnara fully expects the Grand Unified Theory to change the way that wizards think about themselves.

“It’s wonderful,” he said. “For so long, our view of the world has been so simple. We could track where magic went, and we just ignored the things that challenged those ideas. And now we’ve learned that most of those ideas aren’t true at all, or are just smaller drops of water in a vast ocean. Even the Grand Unified Theory only leaves us on the brink of more mistakes to explore and perceptions to shatter. The future is going to change as we wander through them with our eyes open.”

Skeeter had at least chosen the right quote to end on, Thomas thought, happily. How could anyone not be excited by that image of the future?

Lucius opened the Prophet that morning, and narrowed his eyes at the photograph. What has Rhangnara done to get his photograph in the paper? Harry said nothing about any such move, and he is usually good enough to warn us before—

Then he saw the headline, and went very still.

He could feel his heart galloping, regular as running footsteps, in his ears. The table trembled a bit. Lucius had to let his magic get far out

of control before he could manage even that much wandless power, but today, he thought, while his body shook with sincere, helpless rage, it was justified.

“Lucius?”

Narcissa’s voice came from the door of the breakfast room. Lucius did not care. He could not look up from the article, or keep from following its bizarre conclusions to the end. More and more of them piled up, and his rage grew stronger, and his scorn.

There is no such thing as the choice of magic. It only grows a personality when confined. It cannot choose who will wield it and who will not.

Place magic? An old and discredited belief of the druids. There are magical places, such as Harry’s Woodhouse, but they will never notice a modern wizard.

Weather? Storms? How can they determine our children’s futures? They are only wind and rain.

Then he read the paragraph where Rhangnara had the gall to claim that the Malfoys had recent Muggleborn ancestry, that Lucius’s own father had been a halfblood.

He froze as he read. He thought of going into the room he had shown Draco when he confirmed his son as magical heir, and the Malfoy ancestors speaking to him of shared blood and responsibilities, and he knew that what Rhangnara said was a lie, designed to cast aspersions on him.

My father was not the son of his mother and a Mudblood. If he was, then he would not have been a Malfoy, and not able to be confirmed as magical heir. That room would have honored only a son of my grandfather.

And then he wondered if Abraxas could have been the son of his father and a Mudblood woman, brought into the family, adopted as her own child by Lucius’s grandmother Anais Henlin, and the door

firmly shut on any discussion of his befouled heritage. That would make him both a halfblood and a Malfoy.

Lucius marshaled his thoughts, then placed them carefully in a box and locked them away. He would not consider them again. They were false. The Malfoys were a pureblood family, and his grandfather would no sooner have touched a Mudblood, or a Muggle, than he would have cut off his own hand.

“Lucius?” That was Narcissa again, standing near the table, her eyes wide and wondering.

He looked up at her, and remembered what the article had said about the Blacks also sleeping with Mudbloods. But surely that had been in previous generations. The recent ones had campaigned to bring back Muggle-hunting. They would not have done that if they had known what they were.

Or they would have done that if they needed to convince others that they were perfect purebloods, and hide their shame deeply, where no one would look for it.

Lucius also placed that thought in the treasure chest. He would not think of that. Narcissa was pureblooded. He was pureblooded. Draco was pureblooded. He would not think that his son’s veins were swarming with dirty blood, or his wife’s.

Much less my own.

“It seems that one of Harry’s allies has done something mad, again,” he said dryly, and extended the paper so that she could read it. Narcissa accepted it and sat down, only letting a tiny, well-bred gasp escape her mouth every so often.

Lucius stared at her, at her lovely face, at the way she sat with her blonde hair just escaping in soft curling wisps around her white throat, at the delicate bones of her cheeks. Finer than any Mudblood’s, surely. She is not one of them.

No, of course she isn't. Rhangnara is mistaken. And he would not have made those remarks about Malfoys and Blacks unless he intended to attack our family personally.

Lucius nodded his head, securing the truth in his own mind, knowing what he must do. He felt a vague sorrow at the thought of it, but a greater irritation. He was already entwined in careful plotting for which Harry would throw him out of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow in a moment, if he learned of it. He would have to add another coil, this time focused on getting rid of Rhangnara.

That, however, will be a pleasure. The other is a sacrifice I wish I did not have to make.

Lucius flexed his fingers, checked to make sure that his face was smooth as Narcissa hit the part of the article that concerned their families, and reached for his teacup.

Hermione sat up in her bed with difficulty, and managed to reach one of the treats on the bedside table to give to the owl who had delivered the Prophet. The bird snapped up the food delicately and then spread its wings, soaring out the window. Hermione watched it go wistfully. She understood the importance of spending time in bed and taking her recovery carefully after the Severing Curse, and it wasn't as though she never got to write to anyone, and of course she received the Prophet, and she would be going back to Hogwarts in less than two weeks, but still she wished she could have just waved her wand and uttered a Summoning Charm for the treat.

She opened the paper.

She stared at the headline on the front page. She stared at the photograph. She read the article.

She closed her eyes.

For a moment, thoughts tumbled and reoriented themselves in her head. She didn't know what to think, how to feel. She had learned the pureblood rituals to show up some purebloods, and because she was convinced it was the only way a Muggleborn could make anyone

important pay attention to her. As the article said, wizards were adept at lying to themselves. Hermione could be as brilliant and get as many O's on her OWL's as she wanted—as she had, in almost everything—and still people like the witches and wizards at Harry's alliance meeting could give her pitying looks and turn away. She had to adapt and fit in, and the only pleasure she might get out of it was someone complimenting her on her skills and then learning that she was Muggleborn.

But now this.

After a moment, her emotions stopped brewing quite as wildly, and settled on happiness and fierce determination.

If it's true, then no one can say that I must have Squib ancestors, or that I must be a changeling switched at birth. That was one of the speculations Hermione had overheard at the alliance meeting, and it had irritated her profoundly even then. Anyone who had read about fairies knew they didn't do that, and probably never had.

If it's true, then Zacharias is going to be so upset.

Hermione shrugged. Let him be upset. She liked Zacharias a great deal—sometimes she thought she loved him, sometimes she wasn't sure; it wasn't something she could analyze properly—but he had too much invested in his pureblood ancestry. Hermione had tried to adapt and succeed in many things because she had learned, during her third year, that intelligence would not get her everywhere. If this revelation destroyed Zacharias's conception of the world, then he would just have to rebuild.

And Zacharias can be wrong like anyone else.

Connor was glad that he had been awake before anyone else but Trumpetflower—who didn't seem to sleep—and not because he was writing a potentially embarrassing letter to Parvati, as had happened the other morning. It meant he got to see the Daily Prophet first, and look at the story, and laugh and laugh and laugh, and then laugh some more at Trumpetflower's shocked face when he passed the paper to her.

It meant he got to sit back and watch when Harry and Draco came downstairs, yawning. Draco sat at the table, while Harry went to make them toast. He was getting better at the toast, Connor thought. His fire charms didn't burn the bread to ashes any more.

The Prophet lay on the table, face downward. Connor had put it like that on purpose, for maximum shock value. Draco grumbled under his breath about people who couldn't fold a paper courteously when they were done with it, picked it up, and turned it over.

Connor was a bit disappointed with his initial reaction. Draco didn't shriek. He didn't shout something about Rhangnara being wrong and how dare he do this and Harry should fix this right now. His eyes narrowed slightly, as if he were trying to force the sleepiness away.

Then his face went pale, as if he were going to faint.

Connor brought his arm up in front of his mouth to muffle his laughter in his sleeve.

Draco read through the article. Connor could tell by his face when he hit the most interesting parts. When he reached the revelations about blood not being important, his face turned ashen. As he went on, he shook his head more and more, until he looked as if he had epilepsy. Then he reached what Connor knew were the paragraphs on the Black and Malfoy marriages, and tossed the paper into the air, snarling. He snatched his wand from his sleeve in the next instant. Connor was sure that he was going to set the paper on fire.

The Prophet was tumbling all over the kitchen in a mess of sheets, and Connor had his wand, so it was no trouble for him to wave it and call, "Accio front page!" just as Draco cast Incendio at the rest of it. The stink of burning paper filled the room, but the article had already sped over to Connor and settled itself firmly in his hand. Connor pressed the beaming photograph of Thomas Rhangnara, waving his heavy book, against his heart and grinned at Draco over the top of it. Draco looked murderous. That was fun. Connor liked it when Draco was looking murderous. It meant he lost control and shouted

entertaining things. He had come up to Connor's room the other day to make the silliest accusations over the prank that he and Harry had played with the Firebolt. Draco had said it had hurt Harry. Connor knew that couldn't be true, because he and his brother were close enough now that Harry would have come to him and told him about that—if not the day after the prank, certainly later.

"Give it to me, Potter," Draco spat.

"Why?" Connor asked. "It's an innocent article. It never did anything to you." He petted the paper as if it were a Kneazle kitten and watched in fascination as Draco's face darkened further. "Besides," Connor added, just to fan the flames, "it's true."

"It is not!" Draco shouted, and actual spittle came flying out of his mouth on the last word. Connor applauded.

"I think this is the least like a pureblood wizard I've ever seen you act," he told Draco. "I see the article was true after all. And I bet it was a Muggle your great-grandfather slept with."

Draco let out a wordless howl and tried to spring across the table at him. Trumpetflower had grabbed him, though, and just like the rest of the pack, the slender werewolf had much more strength in her arms than someone might think at first. She held Draco effortlessly, and took away his wand with a simple movement. Connor put his head down on the table, unable to muffle his giggles any longer.

"Enough, Draco. Connor."

That was Harry, and he didn't sound like a brother, he sounded like a leader. Connor knew that meant he had gone too far. He lifted his head and gave Harry a contrite look. Harry nodded to accept it. He sometimes seemed to believe that Connor could not possibly cause that much trouble, because he was a Gryffindor and Harry considered Gryffindors a bit simple-minded compared to devious Slytherins. Connor didn't think Harry was even aware he had that prejudice, but Connor himself was not above exploiting it.

“What’s the article?” Harry asked, though in a tone of voice that said he already knew. He extended his hand, and Connor put the front page of the Prophet into it. Harry read it quickly, his eyes narrowing. Now and then he nodded, as though he were encountering a piece of information he hadn’t expected, and near the end his eyes widened. Connor smiled. I didn’t think Rhangnara would dare to mention information about specific families, either, but he did.

Harry put the paper down on the table and turned to face Draco. “Let him go, Trumpetflower, please,” he said.

Trumpetflower did it immediately, and stepped away, but she kept her gaze on Harry. Connor wondered idly if Harry had really noticed the way the members of the pack looked at him. Probably not, because Harry never noticed things like that. He assumed he just asked for things and they got done, because people wanted things from him or because of Loki’s request. But Connor knew that some of the werewolves were thinking of Harry as their true leader. He’d seen the process happen last year, as the students stopped looking at McGonagall as a substitute for Dumbledore and started seeing her as the real thing.

But he looked away from Trumpetflower and went back to watching Draco, which was much more fun. Connor had accepted that Harry and Draco were going to join. He also knew they had had sex at least once, because he wasn’t as unobservant as his brother seemed to think. But he also knew that Draco was only civilized on the surface, and underneath lay a bloody, sodding, prissy little wanker. Harry was about to get a sharp reminder, it looked like.

“That article isn’t true,” Draco told Harry, with a great deal of appeal in his voice. Connor knew the sentiment: Make it not be true. He had done the same thing to Harry when he was younger, especially after Harry took Lily’s magic away, but he had grown up since then. Draco hadn’t.

“It is,” Harry confirmed quietly. “Thomas told me weeks ago, when I contacted him about coming to the meeting for the Alliance of Sun and Shadow.”

Draco just stared at him. Harry looked back, his head on one side, his expression regretful but calm. Connor smiled. He isn't going to yield. Good. Harry gives Draco what he wants far too much of the time.

"Everything?" Draco whispered. "About the Dark Lord Fallen being Mud—Muggleborn? About blood not mattering as much as we thought? About the families—" He stopped and shuddered, seeming unable to continue.

"All of it, as far as Thomas can tell," Harry said. "He might have made a mistake; it wouldn't be the first time. But from what they can tell right now, yes, it's true."

"What's true?" Draco's voice had deepened. Connor shook his head. He wants to see if Harry will actually say it. Of course he will. Idiot.

"The part about your grandfather probably being a halfblood," said Harry.

See? Connor thought at Draco, while the other boy wrapped shaking arms around himself. You thought he wouldn't, and of course he does. If Lily hadn't given him that stupid training, he would have gone to Gryffindor for sure.

"And that would make me one-eighth Muggle," said Draco, his voice deep with disgust.

"Or one-eighth Muggleborn," said Harry. "I really don't think there's any way to tell, and Thomas certainly didn't mention one."

Draco shook his head. "My grandfather was a halfblood," he repeated, with a tone of nausea in his voice.

Connor felt the sudden deep silence in the room. He turned his head, and saw Harry's face so tight that it looked smaller.

"Why, yes," Harry said. "Just like your boyfriend is a halfblood."

Draco stared at him. Then he scowled and said, "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

“How?” Harry asked pleasantly.

“It’s not—you’re not—I know there’s a difference,” said Draco. “I’m not prejudiced against you, Harry. This is about my family, about what blood I have in me.”

“So blood is one thing and a cock is another?” Harry hissed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Connor was glad he wasn’t eating, as he would have choked. He had always known that Harry had a fouler mouth when he got upset, but he hadn’t expected him to say anything like that.

“It is different!” Draco yelled as Harry turned his back. “You aren’t giving me a chance! My whole world has just turned around, I’ve just found out that I’m not who I always thought I was, and you—“

“I know that it’s different with you,” Harry said, not looking back. “It always is, Draco. I think you only accept that I’m a halfblood because you don’t have to think about it. The moment you do, then something like this happens.”

He trotted out of the room and disappeared. Trumpetflower glided after him. Connor knew Harry would have a guard of werewolves until he reached his room or some other safe sanctum.

Draco sank down on the other side of the table, looking a mixture of disgusted and angry and shocked and defeated. Connor coughed and stood up. Draco’s gaze darted to him, and his expression changed again, eyes gone nearly opaque with hatred.

“None of this would have happened if you hadn’t started it,” he said.

Connor laughed again, because he couldn’t help it. “Oh, yes, Malfoy, I control the Prophet, and choose which stories to print,” he said. “And I funded all the research Rhangnara’s group did, didn’t you know? I’ve been setting this up since before I was even born, that’s how powerful I am.”

“He knows I didn’t mean that,” said Draco. “I don’t forget he’s a halfblood, I just don’t think about it.”

“Maybe you should,” Connor said, and left him there. Rufus wanted tea. And a headache potion. And to go to bed and wake up again so that the day could begin once more.

But mostly, tea.

He had already searched his office and confirmed that he had nothing to make tea with there. He didn’t even seem to have a cup left. While he was sitting and wondering who could possibly have stolen his cup, and what they could possibly want with it, the door opened and Percy Weasley entered, carrying two cups of tea and a folded copy of the Daily Prophet. He held one of the cups out to Rufus without a word. Rufus grasped it and drank greedily.

It soothed his headache, a bit, and he settled back in his chair with a sigh. Percy had already taken his desk and spread the paper out in front of him, with the air of someone who’d already read it. Rufus braced himself. Percy was still a trainee Auror, and that meant he was supposed to be getting practice in gauging and anticipating people’s reactions. Time to see if the instructors were still working since Moody left.

“What do you think will happen as a result of that?” Rufus asked, nodding at the article.

Percy frowned in thought. He was usually careful, and he had a brain, when he wasn’t trying to jump between the Minister and deadly curses. Rufus approved of that. There were plenty of Aurors who could leap into action at a moment’s notice and Stupefy the enemy. Percy was the kind who knew how to ask questions, and which ones were important.

“Well, the purebloods with a lot of influence in the Ministry aren’t going to be happy,” Percy said. “And even the ones without a lot of influence in the Ministry, I suppose. Most pureblood families have

something in the way of pride for their names and their history, and some of them trade on it. Not us,” he added hastily. “But some.”

Rufus smiled thinly and decided not to tell Percy about his second cousin on his father’s side who had once tried to bluff his way out of Auror custody on the strength of, “But I’m a Weasley!” He nodded. “And if enough people believe it to be true, what do you think will happen?”

Percy’s face went blank, but Rufus couldn’t tell if that was awe, or shock, or just more thought. “Oh, Merlin,” he whispered. “It’s going to be total chaos, isn’t it? Not just a few pureblood families upset that they supposedly had adulterous ancestors. Chaos everywhere. Muggleborns believing that laws should be changed, and magical researchers questioning the basis of some ethics, and people trying to use this information for their own gain, and charlatans promising that they can help parents control how much magic their children are born with...” Percy trailed off, staring at the wall.

“Yes.” Rufus looked at the paper with another sigh. He knew Thomas Rhangnara was connected with Harry, though not how closely. But it was true, just as the Unspeakables had warned him, that Harry was going to bring more chaos down. Revolution was one thing, but Rufus had dealt with revolutionaries before; they usually had clearly-defined goals and the tendency to babble on at anyone who would listen to them. Harry was the only one he’d ever met whose main course of stirring up trouble seemed to be inspiring others to cause that trouble.

The Unspeakables, by contrast, brought clarity. They were being extraordinarily open with him for someone who wasn’t even part of the Department of Mysteries, though Rufus suspected his office helped.

They’d told him that the renegades in the Department had been more devious than they thought. The truth of the attack on Harry was as he’d told it—a fact that had been obscured when the Unspeakables first came and spoke with Rufus. They’d believed, then, that some of their people had been part of the “attack,” but had just wanted to speak with Harry.

Now they knew that some of their own had been Obliviated, and, more, dream-woven, which made them think that certain experiences had happened in reality when they were just waking dreams. The Obliviated and the dream-woven had recovered their memories, and they were one step closer to finding the traitors. But they had asked Rufus to delay Harry from spreading more chaos if he could. Trust of the Unspeakables would diminish if the Boy-Who-Lived said they were to be distrusted. And now the Unspeakables who had come to Rufus suspected their traitors had had help from outside the Department. They even thought they knew who, but it would take some time to confirm if they were right.

Rufus had had hope. The Unspeakables were being as open with him as they could without breaking their oaths to the Stone, which chose them, and was an artifact as ancient, powerful, and incorruptible as any justice ritual. What was sworn to on the Stone could not be broken or doubted—but the traitors had found a way to keep their oaths while advancing only a narrow set of goals that did not truly benefit the Department of Mysteries. The loyalists' inquiries into how were continuing.

Rufus, armed with that knowledge, had faced Harry, and found him worse than the cold, proud boy who would not reply to his letters out of sheer stubbornness. He had found someone who could not seem to understand that more people than his revolutionary group existed in the world. He had found someone who was not content to defend himself with the common magic available to everyone, or make his way to other levels of the Ministry in an effort to find help when he was attacked, but had to use his absorbere gifts, and thus increase both the traitors' fear and the likelihood that Harry would use it against other Ministry employees.

He had found, Rufus feared, an incipient Lord.

He stared in silence at the paper, at the smiling man who held the book with the acronym GUTOEKOM gleaming in gilded letters and could not seem to understand why other people would not welcome his theory. Rufus felt as if he were looking at Harry, too, and Harry's allies—dancing above an abyss, and not understanding the emptiness that lay below, or the people who would fall.

Rufus knew he would have to wait, because the Unspeakables had asked him to, and because, though the balance between him and Amelia had very subtly begun to shift in his favor, it had not tilted all the way yet. He could not even send a letter to Harry, because Harry would only ignore it in his pride and certainty that he knew what he was doing, as he had all the others.

Galling, he thought, to wait while your Ministry rips itself to shreds around you, and the best and brightest hope of the wizarding world looks first to himself and those he has sworn to protect, and only then to the world his actions will shake.

“And this is where we have the major presses,” Dionysus Hornblower was yelling cheerfully, over the thump and clack of the Vox Populi being produced. “Run without house elves and on our own magic, of course.”

“Of course,” Honoria murmured, watching as the machine in question gleamed and ratcheted and danced through its motions in a blaze of metal. The Maenad Press used a large house near the end of Diagon Alley. Honoria wondered idly whether they’d had to bribe the shopkeepers near them to ignore the noise, or if they’d just bought the space and planned to expand. Dionysus looked as if he were an expanding kind of wizard.

He had been absolutely delighted when Honoria appeared and said that she was to function as Harry’s liaison with the Maenad Press. And, to be honest, Honoria was delighted right back. Dionysus was brash and too confident and noisy, as the instantly converted tended to be. (Honorias mother had been noisy about having married a pureblood wizard most of her life). He worshipped Harry in one breath and criticized him soundly in the next, mostly for moving too slow. He yelled at the people working on the Populi—editing articles, assembling the paper, creating the magical construct owls that delivered it—and they yelled right back, unintimidated. He had already mentioned going to Azkaban, fighting with Aurors, sneaking out of enemy territory during the First War with Voldemort, sleeping with an unknown woman only to find out that she was a Death Eater the next morning, and more stories that Honoria wanted to hear in full. Ignifer would just hate him.

He was the epitome of Gryffindor, whatever his House at Hogwarts had actually been, if he had attended Hogwarts. Honoria wasn't entirely sure he hadn't spent his years between eleven and seventeen on the run all over the Continent while being taught Dark Arts, illegal Charms, and blood magic.

Honoria had missed people like this.

"That owl is missing a left wing, Jamie!" Dionysus yelled at one of his workers, who probably wasn't even named Jamie, but was instantly correcting his mistake. He turned back to Honoria, beaming. "Have a plethora of articles on that new theory," he said. "Due to come, or whatever its name is. Fascinating nonsense. Have you read it?"

Honoria blinked. "Ah, no." She'd split her days lately between visiting the Maenad Press—well, spying on it at first—scouting out London pack territory to help the werewolves who lived there with escape routes if the Department showed up on the next full moon, and shagging Ignifer.

"Pity," Dionysus said. "Read the first hundred pages last night. Changed my mind on some things. Changed my mind completely. That young Harry, he's a changemaster, yes?"

"I don't know what that means," said Honoria. She felt a grin threatening to split her face. She was left behind and scrambling to keep up. It was fantastic.

"Means he comes into a place, and it changes," said Dionysus. "But he knows about that and anticipates it, not just hides in fear. Changes the center of gravity, as some Muggles I know go on about. Hepzibah, don't make me come over there and finish editing the bloody thing for you! Congratulations, Jamie boy, now the owl is missing its right wing. Yes, Harry knows how to change things."

Honoria laughed. She was having fun. She'd have to thank Harry for giving her this assignment.

And then the entire room turned red. Honoria lifted her head in astonishment. The globes filled with a heatless light charm that hung from the ceiling had been white-gold before, but now they blazed like the fire of an angry Hungarian Horntail.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

Dionysus had a gleam of battle in his eyes when she looked back, and had already drawn his wand. “Means the wards have been triggered,” he said happily. “Use of a powerful magical artifact not in common use nearby. The Unspeakables have shown up. Thought they would.” His grin widened. “Ready for them.”

“What?” Honoria said blankly, and then the Unspeakables attacked.

It was like nothing she’d experienced. Gray cloaks were swooping out of nowhere, seeming to congeal out of mist that drifted from the walls. They carried glass globes, thin straps of bronze, patches of light that made Honoria’s head hurt to look at but which drew her eyes anyway. Some of them definitely had swords. The level of magic in the room had increased to the point that Honoria didn’t think she’d felt anything like it, even when Harry was at the alliance meeting.

Dionysus howled happily. “Hullo, you bastards!” he shouted, and swept his wand in a gesture Honoria knew she had never seen before. “Lions roar, you know.”

The crimson glow from the lights grew more intense. Then the walls appeared to catch on fire, and from them came glowing shapes that intensified and took on solid form as they flew. They were magical constructs, like the owls, Honoria thought, but these had the shape of lions. By the time they landed, each had a mouth full of teeth and paws bristling with sharp claws.

The Unspeakables turned to deal with them. Honoria saw some of the swords come sweeping down, and even though they only cut across a lion’s shadow, the crimson creatures screamed and vanished. One shoved its head towards the light in a gray-cloaked figure’s hand and then charred and crisped, like a moth venturing too close to a flame. Honoria was sure, in the moments before she took

to her gull form so that she could fly above the chaos and be in less danger from it, that she saw one Unspeakable also rip a lion apart with the two halves of a glass globe.

But the lions were doing their damage, too, tearing open gray robes and making blood fly, and Dionysus's people were rising with their wands in their hands now, as if they had expected it. Honoria knew she'd made the right choice in taking to the wing, no matter how many people had seen her change and so knew she was an Animagus. The flashing colors of Stupefy, Diffindo, more hexes and jinxes than she could count, and an occasional Severing Curse were blinding. She shuddered in particular at recognizing the Severing Curse, thinking of a cold night in October when she'd dropped between Harry and Igor Karkaroff and felt one of those catch her across her chest and belly.

Dionysus was in the middle of it all, directing the attack like the master of a circus directing the acts. His shouts of encouragement in battle, Honoria found, didn't sound much different from the scoldings he gave to be sure that his people did what they were supposed to do with the paper. He had a shield around him that appeared to eat every attack the Unspeakables could come up with, but which didn't stop his own spells from getting out. Honoria saw him stun and bind two Unspeakables whose cloaks fell back to reveal pale, shocked faces, and he dueled with another one-on-one for two minutes before putting him out with what Honoria thought was a time-delayed blast of light that blinded him.

The thunder of spells and roaring from the lions and teeth-clattering rattle from some of the artifacts the Unspeakables carried only lasted for a few minutes, but that was more than long enough for Honoria. Give me Woodhouse and planned battle any time, she thought, winging uneasily in circles, dodging the occasional curse from someone who'd noticed her.

Then the Unspeakables still standing vanished, taking their artifacts with them. The lions at once paused and lowered their heads towards Dionysus, bowing like shadows made of flame. Then they leaped and melted into the walls again, and the lights turned back from crimson to white. Dionysus swept the room with a practiced eye, and nodded.

“Jamie, help Hepzibah bandage that wound,” he said. “Diana, you’re off-work for the rest of the day; go home. Godric, for the love of all that’s holy, you’ll sit down now or I’ll sit you down.”

Honorio returned cautiously to the floor, changing back into her human body as she went. Dionysus saw her and grinned.

“There you are,” he said. “Should have reckoned you would be a gull. I like it, I like it. Fits.”

“You—you sounded as if you were prepared for that,” Honorio said, staring at the Unspeakables lying on the ground. Even the bloodied ones seemed to be just unconscious, not dead. She expected them to change into mist at any moment, but they didn’t. They just lay there.

“I was,” said Dionysus. “Bastards are always showing up when they think I’m making too much trouble.” He nodded once or twice. “Worked up a battle plan with my people, and we only use spells that aren’t going to send us to Tullianum. Besides, the Unspeakables are always aiming to capture, not kill. Only fair if we do the same to them.” He nodded again. “Mind you, this is the most serious attack we’ve ever had, but I anticipated that. I’m seriously annoying them at the moment.”

“And the lions?” Honorio asked.

Dionysus chuckled. “Like them? They’re the products of an artifact I stole from the bastards. And the shield, too. And a few other little things.” He winked. “Of course, tell anyone other than Harry and I’ll know who prated.”

“How do you steal from the Department of Mysteries?” Honorio said. She needed to sit down. Dionysus had steered her into a chair before she could think to ask for one.

“When they try to recruit you and then change their minds later,” said Dionysus gleefully. “They would have modified my memory or chained me there to do whatever it is they do to prisoners. Theft was the least they deserved. Bastards.” It seemed to be his favorite insult.

“And what are you going to do—with them?” Honoria nodded at the captured Unspeakables. Dionysus followed her gaze, and his whole face seemed to become sharper.

“Right now? Have a good laugh at the Ministry with the Populi. And then introduce them to another little toy of mine. Bastards are all immune to Veritaserum, but not to my toy.” Dionysus actually rubbed his hands together. “And then tell Harry about what I find. If I want to. Certainly report it in the Populi. The people deserve to hear and know the truth.”

Honoria leaned on her hand and shook her head. She supposed one of her major tasks would be convincing Dionysus to share all of what he found with Harry, since the Unspeakables were Harry’s enemies as well, and also what he might know about the Department of Mysteries from the brief time he’d spent training there. He might share it without convincing, but Honoria was not willing to wager on that. He could change his mind in a moment.

Merlin, this is so much fun. Now that I know what to expect, anyway.

She leaned back and smiled at Dionysus. “This is going to make the Ministry look very bad,” she said.

Dionysus chortled. “They deserve it. Bastards.”

Chapter Eighteen: Dionysus and His Maenads

“The Unspeakables he talked to confirmed that they attacked the Press because they wanted to shut him down,” Honoria said, her eyes half-slitted in enjoyment as she sipped at the cup of orange juice Harry had given her when she refused tea. “And something else, which he was reluctant to tell me at first until I reassured him that it would never go further than your ears.” She gave Harry an enigmatic look. Harry nodded. He certainly wasn’t about to announce whatever Honoria had to tell him from the front page of the Prophet. That Hornblower would do so in the Populi was shocking enough.

Honoria let out her breath. “They did want to capture him—him and anyone they could get their hands on, really. They would have Obliviated me and anyone else they didn’t take. Dionysus said that it’s their usual course. The Unspeakables usually strike to capture, not kill, unless the other person has invaded the Department of Mysteries. He also thinks it’s why that faction of Unspeakables seems to want to identify werewolves with collars and papers, rather than just kill them the way the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts wants to.”

“What do they do with their prisoners?” Harry whispered, feeling a convulsive shudder travel through him at the thought of going down into the bowels of the Ministry and never emerging again.

“That was the thing we couldn’t find out,” said Honoria, with a sad smile. “At least, not from those Unspeakables. Dionysus said they swear an oath not to talk about it. He was surprised he’d got that much out of them.” Her fingers slid along her glass. “But he can guess, based on what he saw in his own short time in the Department of Mysteries.”

Harry shook his head. He still found it hard to believe that anyone sane would approach Dionysus Hornblower and ask him to have anything to do with secrecy. “What does he think they do, then?”

“Use the magic and the bodies of those they capture. He said it would make sense, given that they wanted to capture you.”

Harry gave a smile he knew was twisted. The most important thing about him was his magic, Falco Parkinson told him. Well, why wouldn't the Unspeakables have thought the same thing? And a Lord-level wizard who could drain magic himself was probably of interest to them. Pity I can't send them after Voldemort.

He did toy with the idea of spreading a rumor that Voldemort was recovering, but then shook his head. The panic it would cause wasn't worth it, and it was unlikely to distract the Unspeakables from everything else they were doing, including influencing the Minister.

"Thank you for assigning me to the Maenad Press," Honoria said, capturing Harry's attention again. "I love this. Dionysus is who I want to grow up to be." She was grinning.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "But not who you want to shag?" he asked, grateful to be able to tease her about something.

"Please." Honoria stood with a shrug. "As if I have any interest in men. If I did, there are people who would already have filled that place."

"Tybalt?" Harry knew they were old friends.

"Among others." Honoria winked at him, and then turned and walked towards the Floo on the far side of the room. Casting a handful of green powder into the flames, she called out, "Dragonshome!" and was gone.

Harry leaned back, with his arms folded behind his head, and closed his eyes. He was in the middle of a seething, boiling cauldron here, and this time, he didn't have the excuse of retreating to the Sanctuary while someone else watched the pot for him. He felt, rather, as if the Maenads pictured on the front page of the Vox Populi would sweep around the corner at any moment, seeking to tear him apart in retaliation for all the mistakes he'd made.

He had to plan, had to think, and some of it would take longer than a single day.

For the moment, though, he might as well go up to a bedroom bereft of Draco and try to sleep as well as he could. Harry knew that the morning, which would bring the publication of Hornblower's article on the attack, would be vicious.

Ignifer felt Honoria arrive home, the wards twanging, but she couldn't leave the room and go to her, as much as she wished to. She was occupied in a different conversation with a very different woman in a fire, instead. This was her mother, Artemis, who had firecalled her every day for the past sixteen years, trying to persuade her to change her mind and Declare for Light again. Resisting her had become considerably easier since Ignifer had started sharing a bed with Honoria, though.

This time, something had changed. Artemis had given her scolding. She had asked Ignifer to make submission to her father so that Cupressus might forgive his daughter and welcome her back. Ignifer had refused. But now Artemis lingered, her eyes darting around the room beyond the flames as if she wanted to admire Ignifer's paintings and panels. Ignifer stood with her arms folded, refusing to close the connection before her mother decided on it. That would not be polite.

"Do you ever find," her mother said at last, "that there are some things you cannot discuss with your fellow dishonorables in the Dark? Some things that are unspeakable?"

Ignifer opened her mouth to reply, and then shut it slowly. She stared at her mother. Artemis stared back with pleading eyes.

Ignifer understood the silent message well enough. She has reason to think that the Unspeakables are watching their house. Well, why not?

She had known, from the time when she was a small girl and still thought her father the center of the universe and the greatest wizard in creation, that the Apollonis family had artifacts on hand that other wizards wouldn't like them possessing. It was just a sign of shortsightedness, Cupressus had explained to her. Other wizards would say the artifacts were dangerous, but they weren't, not if treated with respect. What would cause them to lose blood or limbs

was forcing those artifacts to perform like slaves or beasts of burden. One approached them in honor, or not at all.

Then had come a day when Ignifer returned home from her tutor's house and found all the artifacts gone, her mother white to the lips, and her father with a burn on his face. He refused to speak a word. He simply fingered a scrap of gray cloth.

Ignifer had learned that Unspeakables had raided the house and removed the artifacts, saying they were too dangerous for any family to possess, even the most Light-devoted family in Ireland. She learned it in that roundabout way that she learned most things in the Apollonis household. Rumor and myth and murmured words and glances eventually distilled into reality.

She did not believe, even now, that the artifacts had been the kind commonly raided from criminals. Cupressus would never have stood for anything Dark in his home, as his reaction to Ignifer's Declaration proved. He had thought they were safe, and they had certainly been of the Light.

And now the Unspeakables were pressuring him again, it seemed, or watching him, or urging him to act against Harry.

"There are many things that are so difficult to say," said Ignifer carefully, watching her mother. "I was reared in the Light, and even those who chose Dark late in their lives find me odd." She heard the door to the room open behind her, and knew that Honoria had entered. Artemis's face tightened, but she still didn't shut down the Floo connection. "But I know that sometimes, silence is the best course."

Artemis's eyes closed in relief. "Yes, that is true," she whispered. "Silence, and only speaking when it's time. I am glad that you understand me, daughter." And then the Floo connection went dark, the green to the flames spluttering and dying. Ignifer shook her head.

Honoria wrapped her arms around her waist and leaned up to kiss her. "What was that about?"

“Unspeakables trying to push my father to do what they want, I think,” Ignifer said, turning around to bury her face in Honoria’s hair. She smelled so good, and in the past few months, Ignifer had begun to dare to allow herself to think that the smell wouldn’t be snatched away from her just as she got used to it. “Or perhaps make him act against Harry.”

There was silence for a moment, and then Honoria snorted.

“They’re trying to push your father around?” she asked. “The man so stubborn that he’s resisted reconciling with his own bloody daughter for over a bloody decade?”

“Yes,” Ignifer murmured into her ear. “I wish them joy of Cupressus Apollonis.” For the first time in sixteen years, she could imagine her father acting as he normally would without pain, and the subtle, inflexible rings he would spin around the Unspeakables trying to spin rings around him. Cupressus had held his own family in check with an iron will, but he had done much the same thing with the other Light-devoted families of Ireland, to the point where all of them considered him their leader. Like only Harry that Ignifer could think of, Cupressus was not afraid of the Ministry’s shadow-hunters.

Honoria was laughing, Ignifer realized when she came back from her daze. “So do I,” she murmured. “And now. Bed?” She tilted her head up hopefully.

Ignifer kissed her. “If you say so.”

Harry yawned before he could stop himself, then winced and shook his head. He hadn’t spent a productive night as far as sleep went; sometimes he’d managed to snatch a whole hour before he had to rise up and pace around his room again, because he’d had another idea or another insight or another plan to fit into place. As it went, his throat hurt with weariness, and sometimes his eyes blurred.

But he could repair that with sleep later, and he had seen things that he would never have seen if he had waited until the morning. His step as he came down the stairs was firm, and he felt a quiet confidence filling him. He was in the middle of chaos, but his priorities in the middle of that chaos were the same as they had always been: stay on

the vates path, help those who looked to him for protection, continue to live and heal himself simultaneously with everything else. He thought, now, that Scrimgeour was faltering precisely because the chaos had warped his own vision of what his priorities should be.

He entered the kitchen, vaguely aware of one of the werewolves, probably Trumpetflower, walking behind him. They did seem to always keep an eye on him. Harry wondered if he should be worried by that; he doubted they had so closely observed Loki. If they couldn't trust him to take care of himself, they might not trust Harry to take care of them, and there had to be mutual trust between pack and alpha. All the research Harry had studied agreed on that.

Another thing to consider.

Only one person was in the kitchen: Draco, sitting at the table and scowling at a paper. Harry couldn't see whether it was the Prophet or the Vox Populi from this angle. He suspected it didn't matter.

Draco jerked his head up when he saw him, and stared. Harry just nodded back. He needed to—talk to Draco. That was the best description he had come up with of what he wanted to say. Not yell, of course, but “reconcile” would imply more of a breach than Harry had thought was there, and “apologize” was not entirely true. “Face the truth with,” maybe.

“Good morning, Draco,” Harry said quietly. “I'd like to speak with you, if you don't mind.” If Draco told him to sod off, then he'd eat breakfast and go talk to someone else. Snape was a good candidate.

Draco blinked as if that were the last thing he'd expected, then looked over Harry's shoulder and scowled. Harry turned. As he'd thought, Trumpetflower stood there, amber eyes fixed on him.

“I don't want an audience,” Draco snapped.

“Fine,” said Harry, and caught the tail end of an astonished look on Draco's face before the Malfoy composure covered it. Really, did he think I'd refuse a reasonable request? It's only stupid things I'll refuse.

Harry nodded at Trumpetflower. "We're going to my room. Will you stand guard outside it and make sure that no one interrupts?"

"She could hear something," Draco said.

"I'll cast a ward so that she can't," said Harry.

"I want to stay here," said Draco, folding his arms and scowling.

"Other people have to get in and eat breakfast," Harry said.

Draco opened his mouth, then shut it again and stood up. He watched Harry with more interest now. Harry arched an eyebrow back, gave a thin smile, then turned and led Draco out of the kitchen.

Trumpetflower caught his arm. "Wild, are you sure it's a good idea for you to be alone with him right now?" she whispered. "Loki could handle Gudrun, but they were mates. It was impossible for them to truly hurt each other."

Harry squeezed her hand. "I'll be fine, Trumpetflower, but I would appreciate it if you would talk to anyone who wants to talk to me and turn them away for right now. And, of course, not try to undo the ward so that you can listen in," he added, catching a glimpse of her wand in her shirt pocket.

Trumpetflower lowered her eyes. "We just want you to be safe, alpha, that's all," she said.

"I know," said Harry, and waited until she nodded. He could feel Draco's eyes on his back, and knew the balance of his mind was sliding more and more from angry to thoughtful. Or, at least, it should be if he was any kind of Slytherin at all.

Harry led the way up the stairs, Draco just behind him and Trumpetflower at his heels. He let Draco see him casting the ward on their room that would prevent anyone outside from listening in, even with some of the less common and cleverer eavesdropping spells. Trumpetflower took up her position as guard, and Harry walked inside with Draco and shut and spell-locked the door.

He turned around. Draco already had his arms folded again, and the mulish anger on his face. Harry doubted it was entirely genuine. Draco was going to push and see how much he could get away with, as he so often had before. Harry fought hard not to smile. Making this into a conversation between reasonable adults, instead of a shouting match, had paid off.

“What you did to me yesterday was wrong,” Draco started. “You knew about that theory, and you didn’t tell me!”

“I knew about the Black and Malfoy marriages, and the general truths of the Grand Unified Theory, before then,” said Harry. “I am sorry for not telling you—if you can tell me that you would have accepted this at any time.”

“What?” Draco blinked.

“If I had told you about this when Thomas first told me,” Harry said, making sure to watch Draco’s eyes, “would you have accepted it? Or would you still have been nauseated that your grandfather was a halfblood?”

Draco’s eyes flicked slightly to the right before he said, “Of course I would have accepted it. It would have been in private, not making a fool out of me in front of your prat of a brother!”

Harry shook his head. “You’re lying, Draco, and I don’t need Legilimency to tell that, either,” he added, when Draco opened his mouth to protest. “I should have handled the situation better. I can admit that. I should have done it in private. But I don’t think you would have accepted it even that way.”

“Why did he do that?” Draco burst out. “He must know that the only Black-Malfoy marriage in existence right now is my family’s! He’s making all three of us look bad. He must have done it on purpose! Why aren’t you trying to exile him from the alliance for treachery against your partner and his father?”

“Because he doesn’t see it that way,” said Harry, blinking. He knew blood was important to Draco, but could he have truly spent time in close quarters with Thomas and not realized he wouldn’t care about that? “He sees it as an interesting fact. Maybe amusing, given that those families have always said they were pureblooded to the bone. I’m sure he said more than that, and Rita Skeeter chose what to include in the article. That he did say it, I have no doubt. It’s interesting to him, Draco. And that’s all. He didn’t mean it as an attack because he can’t conceive of blood being as important to someone as it is to your family. You’re still magical, and you’re not research wizards, as he is. Does it matter how you got to be magical?”

“Of course it does!” Draco said.

Now we’re getting somewhere. Harry leaned against the bed. “Why?”

“Because we’re not Muggles,” Draco said passionately. “We don’t share anything with them, Harry! And even the Muggleborns like Granger—I suppose it’s good that she can study the pureblood rituals and fit in, but you can’t say that she’s the same as we are!”

“Probably not,” said Harry. “I think this came too late for a lot of people to completely change the way they feel about blood. But Hermione’s children? I can see them growing up proud of who they are, not caring about the old prejudices. As Thomas said in that article, it’s the future that’s so exciting, more exciting than the revision of the past.”

“She’s not the same,” Draco snapped.

Harry frowned a bit. He thought he knew where this was going, but he wanted to be sure. “Draco,” he said. “I’m not going to make you change your mind, though there are some things we need to talk about with blood. But what do you want, exactly? You know that I won’t just stand silent as you call Hermione a Mudblood. That’s under common rules of politeness.”

“I want you to believe that there’s something different about her,” Draco insisted. “Because there is.”

Harry had to laugh, though he tried to do it as gently as possible. Draco stared at him, betrayed.

“Draco,” Harry said, striving to make his words also gentle, “even if I believed that, do you think it would matter to me? I’m trying to bring centaurs, werewolves, house elves, into this alliance—all people that are far more different from you than you are from Hermione. Difference is not enough to put me off someone. Behavior would be, and if Hermione tried to use this to force you to change your mind on blood differences, well, that’s wrong. So far, though, I don’t know what she thinks. So far, all I have is your behavior to judge by. And it’s not impressing me very much.”

“It’s different,” Draco said, and now he was pleading. “You know that, Harry. You were raised pureblood.”

Harry winced. I thought it would come back to this sooner or later. “I wasn’t, Draco,” he said.

Draco blinked again.

“I was abused,” Harry said, though the word made his skin crawl as he said it and all his trained sensibilities want to revolt in protest, “into believing that I needed to know those rituals to win Connor allies. That is the only reason that I know as much as I do, Draco. Not interest in the rituals for their own sake. I can’t think of much I’m interested in for its own sake. I was also raised with a belief that Dark was evil and Light was purely good, and that I could trust Headmaster Dumbledore before anyone else. I changed my mind on those things. Why shouldn’t I change my mind on the others? Evaluate them, rather than blindly believe them? Culturally, I’m pureblood. But if that means I have prejudices, I won’t hold onto them just because I was raised with them.”

“But if you don’t, then your blood—“ Draco stopped.

“I know,” said Harry calmly. “I know that my knowledge of the old dances made some of my allies look past my blood. By now, though, people like Mrs. Parkinson and Mr. Bulstrode should know me well enough not to care about that. If they don’t, they can always leave the

alliance.” He took a step forward. “The real candidate here, Draco, the first real test, is you. Do you love me enough to actually be in love with someone who’s half-Muggleborn? Or do you want to ignore it the way you always did? I’m afraid that I don’t want to ignore it any longer. You believe strongly in purity of blood. If you speak up about it, though, I’m not going to be silent. I will remind you that I’m a halfblood as often as you remind me that you’re a pureblood. We are equals. Nothing can change that. Unless you want to step out of the joining ritual now, of course.”

Draco was silent for so long that Harry began to fear what he would say. But he steadied himself against the temptation to back off, and apologize, and say that of course it didn’t matter what Draco believed, that Harry would always be there by his side to accept and support him.

It matters. Damn it, it does. And I cannot be afraid, not like this. I am vates. It’s my path to grant freedom first and foremost. If Draco can’t look past this, it’s better that he be free of the joining ritual now, so that he can find a partner he’s happier with. No one I love can wear chains.

Harry lost his train of thought as Draco let loose a little snarl and grabbed him, yanking him close and kissing him hard enough to involve much pain and little pleasure. Harry accepted it, because he thought he had his answer. He waited until it was done, and then stepped back and asked, “Well?”

“You win,” Draco said. “You always do.”

Harry shook his head. “Not good enough. I don’t want to claim victory over you. Do you accept what it’s going to be like, Draco? That this argument isn’t one we can just resolve, that it’s going to turn between us while we live over and around it? I don’t want to have an imaginary agreement, where both of us feel constrained to never talk about blood or the Grand Unified Theory. I want to be able to argue with you.”

Draco closed his eyes. “My fault for falling in love with a vates,” he muttered. Then he glared at Harry. “As long as we’re using honesty, I

hate it when you talk about the end of the joining ritual. It makes me feel as if you want it to end.”

Harry smiled. “I want it to end, but not for the reasons you think,” he said.

Draco stared at him again. Then he said, “You’re too good with words. Yes, damn it, all right. We live with this. And I won’t call Granger a Mudblood when I see her again.”

“And I apologize for not telling you earlier,” said Harry.

Draco gave a short nod, then took a closer look at Harry and snorted. “You didn’t sleep any better than I did last night,” he said, and climbed into his own bed, patting the sheets beside him in silent invitation.

Harry hesitated only a moment before joining him. He had other things to do, that was certainly true, but what he wanted most was the courage to do them, not the time. There was nothing that had to be handled immediately, right now.

Besides, he wanted to sleep with Draco.

He settled himself carefully in the strange bed, and then found it wasn’t strange at all as Draco’s arms wrapped fiercely around him. Harry rested his head on Draco’s shoulder and his hand on his spine.

“Someday, I’ll be the one to reach out first,” Draco murmured into his ear.

Harry snorted, stirring Draco’s hair. “Not everything is a sacrifice,” he said. “Or a debt. I wanted to talk to you, so I did. Simple as that.” He closed his eyes. Weariness was coming in now like a tide, as if it had only been waiting for the moment he lay down to return.

“Nothing with you is simple,” Draco whispered, and then Harry was fairly sure he fell asleep. Or maybe that was himself, remembering nothing past the moment in which Draco touched his hair, with a gentleness that felt strangely akin to awe.

Rufus had received messages from Unspeakables and magical owls and regular owls and Percy, but he had to admit that finding a letter slid under his door was new. He had come to the office at a more normal time today, and therefore had only a few moments to cast spells on the envelope, looking for hexes, before Percy strode in with the Vox Populi swinging from his hands.

“Look at this, sir!”

Rufus examined the article, and his mouth tightened. Of course Hornblower was claiming that Unspeakables had attacked the Maenad Press. It was the kind of thing he would claim, the kind of story that he would wave in the air as a banner, trying to rally the masses. The problem was, this time he was only one factor among many troublesome ones, and the rallying might actually work.

“What’s that, sir?” Percy had caught sight of the letter.

“I don’t know who it’s from, yet,” said Rufus. He was sure that it could not be from the Department of Mysteries; they would have come to him themselves, rather than send a letter, and in any case they usually used gray parchment and an hourglass sigil. “I found it shoved under my door this morning.”

Percy narrowed his eyes. “And no one saw anything?”

“No.” Rufus knew Percy didn’t trust Wilmot, though Percy couldn’t say why; he just shuffled his feet and looked embarrassed when Rufus asked. “And I don’t think there are any spells on it.” Nevertheless, he cast a spell that would hang the letter in the air a distance from him, then cast yet another that would slit open the envelope. Inelegantly, the three sheets of paper tucked inside tumbled out.

Rufus examined what he could see. It wasn’t a letter. It appeared to be pages ripped from a book. He frowned and cast another spell. But the Deprendo revealed no sign of magic on the pages, Dark or otherwise. Rufus felt safe, at last, to pick them up, shuffle them, and read them.

They began in the middle of a sentence, which wasn't helpful, but Rufus quickly discovered why his mysterious correspondent had wanted him to see them.

--did not believe in the loyalty of those who would have sworn themselves to the shadows. He was a Light Lord, and fierce with it, a deadly opponent of any such thing as secrecy. He asked how the newly formed Ministry could have a Department that worked in the shadows and yet be the bastion of justice for the wizarding world that it was supposed to be.

The first Unspeakable, whose name has passed into history only as the First, reassured him. "We have one artifact already that we have studied and understand the purpose of," he said.

This artifact was the Stone, a great gray block at least ten feet high, and ornamented with white runes. The Light Lord examined it, and admitted it was undeclared, neutral magic, neither Dark nor Light. But he demanded a demonstration of how the Stone would keep the Unspeakables loyal to the Ministry.

The First laid his arm upon it, and cut his palm in the manner of someone securing a life debt oath. "I swear that I will be loyal to the Stone," he said. "And the Stone serves the Ministry. I cannot lie, save in the service of the Stone. I cannot hurt others, save in the service of the Stone. I cannot vanish into the shadows, save in the service of the Stone."

Those oaths are the ones all Unspeakables have taken from that day to this one, and the Stone has kept them loyal. Minister after Minister has been pleased to accept those oaths. The Unspeakables are chosen by the Stone; they do not choose themselves. Promising recruits who cannot accept the oaths and subordinate their wills to the Stone's do not join the Department of Mysteries. The Stone itself is the product of another world—for similar artifacts, one may consider the Maze that traditionally sits within the Potter home of Lux Aeterna—and it cannot be fooled as the artifacts of this world may be.

It is worth noting, since it is so often claimed as a folk story, that the Light Lord Seaborn was not satisfied with the Unspeakables'

explanation. He asked how they could know that the Stone was loyal to the Ministry, and they told him that the Stone spoke in their heads. They invited him to put his hands on the Stone and listen. But the Light Lord Seaborn expressed a strange reluctance to do so, saying that he feared his own will would be taken.

Yet every Minister from that day to this who has been introduced to the Stone has agreed that its purposes are the Ministry's. They know it, as perhaps only the Unspeakables otherwise do. Those of us outside the Ministry are fortunate to even know the Unspeakables' oaths. But the will of the Stone, once sworn to, cannot be broken. Unspeakables may seem to do wrong in the public's eye, but they do, always and only, what will advance the goals of the Stone, and thus of the Ministry.

Rufus swallowed. He had known that, of course, though not the specific details about the Light Lord Seaborn. He had known the Unspeakables served the Stone, and that they could not break their oaths. He had known that even the traitors could not really be traitors, not in the sense of acting against the Ministry, and therefore they must have simply interpreted the Stone's orders wrongly. He had been willing to grant the loyal Unspeakables time to find them, because they were still his people, and they had acted wrongly out of the best of motives, not out of fear as Amelia had. It had to be the best of motives. The Stone guaranteed that.

But he had not known the Stone was from another world.

And he should trust the Stone so much only if he remembered meeting it and hearing from its own mind that its sworn companions served the Ministry.

But he did not remember meeting it.

"Sir?" That was Percy, and he sounded concerned, but he also sounded as if he were speaking from a very long distance away. "Is something wrong?"

Rufus shook his head and looked back at the pages. And that was when he saw that some of the letters on the pages were circled, faint

marks that would hardly show up unless someone were looking for them. He would have pulled a piece of parchment from his desk and written the circled letters down, but suddenly he was oppressively aware, as he had never been before, of the wards that ran throughout the Ministry, allowing the Unspeakables to watch what went on. They had been strengthened in his office, for his own protection, of course.

Sick doubt filled his belly. He had believed the Unspeakables blindly, as he only should have after meeting the Stone. The sense of serene confidence described in these pages suited him perfectly.

And he could not remember meeting it.

He ran his eyes over the letters on the page instead, memorizing them. He had used to be fairly good at acronyms and codes when he was an Auror. Then he snorted and crumpled the pages up, tossing them in the air with a snarled, "Incendio."

Percy gasped as ashes drifted down. "Sir?" he asked.

"Damn pages were trying to put a compulsion on me as I read them," said Rufus, wondering if the Unspeakables' wards could pick up his heart beating in his ears like a frightened hare's. "Time-delayed spell. Trying to fill my head with stuff and nonsense about our allies."

Percy looked outraged. "And it was Harry who was doing that to you, sir?"

I must walk a tightrope. I must not let the Unspeakables know that I suspect what they are doing to me. If they are doing it to me. If Harry really is right, and they were lying.

They cannot lie, I thought.

Save in the service of the Stone.

"It must have been," said Rufus. "There were no identifying marks on the papers, but who else would have a reason to try?" He shook his head. "And compulsion, too. It seems that he has slipped from his vates path."

I must be careful. If they took me to meet the Stone and I do not remember it, Merlin knows what else they could do to me.

He provided a sympathetic ear to Percy's outrage, while he rearranged the circled letters on the pages in his head. It didn't take long. The message was too short to be a sentence, only thirteen letters long. It was obviously a name, and in a few moments he had it, if only because that name had drifted across his mind more than once in the past few days.

Aurelius Flint.

Rufus let out a sharp breath as he considered that. Other people in the Ministry were willing to play chess on his side, if he let them. At least, he thought that was what this message meant.

And he needed allies. Reaching out to Harry would only reveal to the Unspeakables what he knew. They had stopped Harry's post reaching him—and didn't that make more sense than Harry just refusing to answer letters, out of boyish pride or not?—and they had altered his memory. Rufus was far more vulnerable to them than Harry was. He would have to play his cards so close to his chest for now that not even Harry could be allowed to see their faces.

For now, he must maintain the tense status quo, dancing between balancing the Department Heads and his own power, and now he had to add the Unspeakable as malevolent partners.

His gaze wandered across the room and fell on the portrait of his grandmother Leonora. She gave him a serene smile.

Rufus narrowed his eyes, and wondered if Aurelius Flint had a portrait in his own office.

Harry stood outside Snape's door for a long moment. He didn't want to do this. He wanted to do this even less than he had wanted to confront Draco. There, there was at least the chance that Draco would reach out to him, because of the love they shared and because Draco couldn't bear arguing with him. Snape had not seemed interested in reaching out to him halfway.

It didn't matter, though. Not after this morning.

Aware of the person waiting around the corner, Harry reached up and rapped on the door.

Small sounds from inside the room, sounds of cursing and pacing, went quiet. Harry waited. Snape must have some means of identifying him. Harry would let five minutes pass, then knock again.

The door opened after three minutes. Snape stared at him without expression. Perhaps he expected a scolding, Harry thought. Perhaps an apology. Well, he was about to get neither. Harry really didn't have time for either. And he had someone on his side who would do a far better job of the scolding than he could. That person had the time, the interest, and the lack of personal connection that Harry now thought were key to helping Snape. He loved Snape so much that he backed off when he saw that he was hurting him. And perhaps if Snape's dysfunction had remained in snapping at Harry and silently fuming at himself, then that would have been enough.

Not after this morning, though. Not after Harry had heard raised voices in the entrance hall of Copley-by-the-Sea, and then heard a curse he recognized, followed by a shriek and the scent of burning hair and skin. If Harry had not been there, if he had not known the countercurse to *Ardesco*, and if he had not dropped the wards on the house long enough to Apparate with her to Hogwarts and the hospital wing, he knew Camellia would have died.

Snape had cursed one of the werewolves. Understandable, perhaps, with the full moon only two nights away, and the house's main focus, including Harry's, on brewing Wolfsbane and making plans to protect the pack from the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts.

But he had stepped past the point where Harry could allow this to continue. The rest of the pack was silent, but it was a threatening kind of silence. They lay in an immense pile for comfort in the middle of Copley-by-the-Sea's biggest room, their amber eyes shining in the

dimness when Harry looked at them. He had told them that it would never happen again, and that he would deal with Snape.

They had watched him. They were shaken, Harry knew. They had depended on their alpha to protect them, and he had not. They would be questioning whether they could trust him now. They would definitely not trust Snape. The temptation during the full moon to slip out of the rooms in which they would otherwise lock themselves, pad down the hall, and chew through Snape's door...

Harry bowed his head. This had gone too far. He had tried to balance Snape's free will and the free wills of the werewolves, and had ended up giving too much free rein to Snape's.

Snape wasn't healing. Harry bore the onus of having waited so long to try and heal him. He looked up into Snape's eyes, and said, "I'm sending you away. To Hogwarts, in fact. I notice that you haven't given Headmistress McGonagall your resignation, so you still plan to teach Potions and act as the Head of Slytherin House. That's fine. But you'll have to spend the last few days before the start of term preparing at the school itself."

Snape said nothing. Harry had expected that. Snape had said nothing for too long. Perhaps I should have left him in the Sanctuary, Harry thought, or denied his request to come with me in the first place. But that would have stepped on his free will, too. These are the costs of being vates

"I can't force you to leave," said Harry. "I know that. And I can't just leave you to hurt, for both your sake and others'. What happened to Camellia could happen to someone else at Hogwarts."

Snape finally spoke, his words glistening dark as pitch. "Did you know that she was the werewolf who attacked me, held me, and threatened to infect me, that day by the lake?"

Harry blinked. "No. I didn't recognize her."

"She was." Snape's voice held only a little of what Harry knew must be a rushing torrent of hatred.

"Did she threaten to infect you now?" Harry asked, making sure to keep his voice calm and toneless.

Snape looked away from him.

"I thought not," Harry said. "You're going, sir. And I'll send someone with you to help you and make sure that you don't curse anyone else." He nodded to the corner, and Joseph stepped around it, his eyes fearless and patient and fixed on Snape. "Regardless, you are not welcome in this house. You used magic against someone under my protection."

"I never swore the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow," Snape snarled.

"And because of that, you think I'll allow you to curse anyone you want?" Harry narrowed his eyes, and let Snape catch a glimpse of his own anger. "No. You've stepped too far. I've tried to help. You've slapped my hand away, except for short periods that I hoped might be signs of healing, or balancing. I can't help you. I know that, I've tried, and I've failed. I'm exhausted. If you really wanted to fester in your own bitterness, I would have been content to let you do it, because that only hurts you and me, but not this. Not this," he repeated, because now Snape was staring at him as if he didn't understand.

"You cannot—" he began.

"He can," said Joseph, and his voice was merciless. "You haven't been acting like a guardian towards him lately. He's been playing the role of parent to you, and you've reacted, at best, like a sulky child. But sulky children don't nearly kill other people because of insults." Harry was glad that Joseph wasn't talking to him like that; he'd never heard anyone, even Snape himself, muster so scathing a tone of disappointment. "Come with me, now."

He reached out and clasped Snape's arm firmly, while Snape was still too astonished to protest. The Portkey he held in his other hand activated then, and the swirl of colors caught them up and washed

them away. Harry closed his eyes. He'd obtained the Portkey from McGonagall while he was at Hogwarts. Harry would send Peter later with Snape's Potions equipment, most of which was too heavy for an owl to fly.

He hadn't realized, when this started, how much faith it was going to take him. He had trusted Snape, and too much. Now he had to trust that what he was doing was for the best, that what actually mattered was giving Snape another chance to prove himself while making sure he couldn't hurt others.

This is probably why Willoughby and other people want to bring me to trial. They don't trust me any more, and why should they?

Harry straightened with a shake of his head. That was done. He would go and speak with the pack now, and make it clear that he took his responsibility as their alpha seriously.

He loved Snape, but he couldn't permit him to lash out cursing werewolves left and right, any more than he could let Draco blindly hurt Connor.

Or vice versa. I've made two mistakes now, going along with that prank and letting Snape stay here without a check on his animosity for so long, and I'm only lucky the consequences haven't been more devastating.

What do I do?

Watch out, of course. And try not to make any more.

Minerva was prepared for it when Severus and his Seer appeared in her office. If she had not been prepared for it, she would not have given Harry that Portkey in the first place. As it was, she sat primly behind her desk, hands folded. She had already been to see the burned young werewolf in the hospital wing, and the sight had filled her with a rage that she had not felt against Severus in all the years they had been colleagues.

May I remind him of the teacher he faced during his years as a student here. Perhaps that will get through to him where nothing else will.

The Portkey spun the two figures out in a whirl of colors in even less time than Harry had told her it would probably take. Severus was staggering, as he obviously hadn't expected to come this way, and he pulled away from the other man in a moment, his wand raised high, a curse on his lips—

Minerva raised an eyebrow. The wards around the school, back under her control after the tearing down and rebuilding Harry had helped her with in the spring, snapped taut, and all Dark Arts magic in the room abruptly ceased to function. That affected no one but Severus, of course. His curse failed, and for a moment he stared at his wand as if it had betrayed him.

"That is enough," said Minerva, making sure to keep her voice smooth and cold, the way the lake froze in winter. "Severus."

Severus turned and looked at her, but said nothing. Minerva understood his glare, well enough not to wither under it. Severus was a frightened boy in one part of himself, and someone had dug up that part and put it on display.

"My name is Joseph," said his Seer, bowing and drawing Minerva's attention. His face was the calmest she'd ever seen, though a hint of frustration appeared when he looked at Severus. "I'll be staying in the dungeons to help the Potions Master heal. I hope that you don't mind."

"I wouldn't have agreed to accept him back without your company," said Minerva crisply, and that, at least, made Severus pay attention to her.

"Minerva," he whispered.

"I would have contacted Professor Slughorn and told him that I needed him to return," Minerva said. "It's true, Severus," she added, as the betrayed look on his face grew further. "I saw the young

woman you cursed. She'll be lucky if she manages to grow any hair on her face again. What is the matter with you, that you would use *Ardesco* on someone outside of battle?" Her own frustration and fear bled through in her voice. She could see how badly Severus needed the sanctuary of Hogwarts, the work he was used to doing, the protection of people who understood him, but Remus Lupin could be argued to need the same things. Minerva had sent him away without hesitation when it became obvious that Remus was a danger to the children she had sworn to protect. If it came to it, she would do the same thing to Severus. She would not play favorites in this, and though Severus might tell himself so, it had nothing to do with Slytherin and Gryffindor.

"She insulted me," said Severus at last, every line in his body tight with rage.

"And you replied with a curse instead of that cutting tongue of yours?" Minerva made every line in her own face tight with disapproval. She was thinking of the boy Severus had been, caught in a spiraling circle of hatred with the Marauders, and how it seemed that he had now turned outward and wielded that hatred upon others. The image of the burned woman in the hospital wing vied with the image of young Severus in her mind's eye. She had failed him, she could admit that—she felt she had failed every student who had gone to Voldemort—but she could not stand aside because of that and allow him to visit the consequences of her failure on others. "I do not believe you could think of no insults equal to what she had done."

"I will not—"

"You will," Minerva told him. "These are the conditions of your employment here at Hogwarts, Severus. I am making Filius Deputy Headmaster. I am going to inquire personally after your talks with Joseph. And if you curse any of your students, even with something so mild as boils, I will sack you."

Severus said nothing. Minerva recognized the mask he'd bolted over his face now. She had seen it too many times in the years when Albus sat in her place, and she felt the familiar frustration sweeping

over her. The temptation to back off and leave him to stew in his own bitterness was strong.

Save that, now, she was the one in the position of protecting the students from him, not Albus. And she did not have the hold over him that Albus had. She had to make sure that he understood her, and if he could not accept the terms, then she would sack him now.

“Very well,” Severus said. His voice had become its bored, mocking drawl again. “I accept, Headmistress. Now, if you will excuse me, I will scuttle back into my dungeons, where I belong.” He bowed and strode quickly for the door.

Joseph followed him. Minerva frowned, but he turned, gave her a reassuring nod, and kept on following Snape.

If he can see his soul, and still wants to help him, then I suppose that there is hope, Minerva thought, and rubbed her brow, sighing.

Then she turned back to testing the wards. Contrary to what Severus might think, her tasks did not all revolve around tormenting him.

Harry came down to breakfast the morning after the first full moon night of August feeling hopeful. His pack had stayed in the Black houses during their change, all given Wolfsbane, most sleeping beyond locked doors. Camellia had returned to them, healed of her burns by Madam Pomfrey’s skill, and if she had demanded that Harry stay with her when she became a werewolf, well, she had the right to demand that. Harry had found some moments of surreal comfort in pacing up and down the halls of Copley-by-the-Sea with a huge dark werewolf at his side, and even in watching the hippocampi with her.

Those allies of his he’d delegated to watch the werewolf packs in London—Honorio, Ignifer, Narcissa, Tybalt, and John—had contacted him near dawn with reports of success. No Department hunters had come after the packs there. Harry knew there might be reports of new hunts in the Daily Prophet, but he was thinking there probably wouldn’t be. Most other werewolves in Britain didn’t live in packs, but as scattered individuals, and the majority of them had refused the

collars and identification papers. The hunters would have to stumble on one by sheer good luck.

He picked up the Prophet, glanced at the first page, and had his hope destroyed by the headline.

DEADLY WEREWOLF MURDER

Harry took a deep breath, and read.

Members of the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts are recovering this morning after a deadly attack on their headquarters last night by a werewolf.

“He was only one, but he was a monster,” said one hunter, Gerald Darkling, 53. “He had white fur, and he moved like a lightning bolt, and none of our spells could affect him, even when they hit him. He bit anyone who got in the way, but he tore Felicia apart. What’s left of her doesn’t look human.”

Felicia was Felicia Joyborn, one of three Department hunters who killed two werewolves last month...

Harry closed his eyes. That would have told him, even if the description of the werewolf hadn’t, what had happened. Loki had taken vengeance on one of the murderers of his mate.

Harry rubbed his forehead tiredly. He’d given warning about Loki’s possible future attacks in the interview he’d granted Skeeter, in the letters he’d posted to Scrimgeour—which he now knew had never reached their destinations—and in a few messages he’d tried having Fred and George pass to Amelia Bones for him, since he doubted she would listen to what he had to say.

And it hadn’t worked.

Harry could see the path stretching ahead. The papers had been full of the chatter about the Grand Unified Theory in the past few days, but this would bring the werewolf issue back into focus. The Department had been ravaged, one of their members murdered and

others made into werewolves. The outcry against the packs would rise again, especially once someone figured out who the attacker must have been. The Unspeakables would be able to push through, with much less resistance, laws that made the collaring and identifying of werewolves mandatory. Harry would have to work hard to disassociate the packs he was protecting from this madness, if anyone would believe him in any case.

All for Loki's vengeance.

This is why I hate revenge, Harry thought dully. Because it never affects only those people it's supposed to affect. It splashes more widely, and it makes one person's rage more important than the free wills of all the rest.

He took a deep breath and stood. He had a pack to reassure. He had speeches to prepare, since some of the reporters would want to talk to him, and Hornblower would probably contact him about an article for the Vox Populi.

And he had Department hunters to offer support to—both the newly-made werewolves, and those two hunters left who were now in danger from Loki's teeth. Politics did make for strange bedfellows, indeed.

And who said this would be easy?

Intermission: The Initiation

Snape wondered that no one in the building they were about to attack could feel the power lapping around him, Malfoy, and Rosier in black, quiet waves. Perhaps they simply accepted the Dark Lord's magic as part of the natural power of the night; it was the autumn equinox, the old holiday of Mabon, when the light and darkness were of equal lengths.

The pause before the night grows longer, Snape's father had once called it. Snape had stared at him in astonishment. Tobias could only have learned that from his wife, and he had said it long after he stopped communicating with Eileen in anything more than grunts. But he had turned away when his son tried to speak to him about it, and never said it again.

It was, though. Snape could feel the power of the night on the wind that swept over them where they crouched in a low, scrubby field of trampled grass. Cold dryness filled his mouth. Overhead, clouds tattered across the moon, which had just begun to dwindle. The stars seemed smaller than normal, and impossibly far away.

Snape shook his head slightly. Whatever concealing spell the Dark Lord was using, it still seemed strange to him the Light wizards could not sense how their lives were about to end.

"It is time."

Malfoy said that as he rose to his feet. He carried his wand out already, and the moonlight let Snape see his faint smile as he held it up. Beside him, Rosier laughed, but Rosier was always laughing. Snape drew his own wand, but didn't raise it as yet. The point of this raid, for him, was to undergo his initiation into the Death Eaters. That meant he had a specific kill to make, in a specific way. No blindly striking out, for him.

A low cry drifted up to them, a sound like a dying deer might make.

"Now," said Malfoy, in an exultant voice as soft as the cry, and then aimed his wand at the house. "Cremo!"

The house's roof exploded into fire. Snape could hear the screams of the children inside, and knew a moment's wild contempt. Observations had indicated those children were at least seven and nine years old, and they were both magical. They should have known how to defend themselves by then. That they did not was pathetic. That their guardians had not taught them to expect something like this, when they were in the middle of a war, was beyond scorn.

The house's door tore open, and a wizard in a huge, floppy robe ran out, his wand aimed at the flames. He didn't even glance at the Death Eaters. Snape wondered, with weary incredulity, if he actually thought chance had started the fire, when the Dark Lord's people were everywhere hunting Mudbloods and the Light wizards who sought to protect them.

"This one's mine," said Rosier. "Glubo!"

The curse manifested as a stream of black fire that Snape could barely see, which struck the wizard full-on in the back as he tried to deal with Malfoy's conflagration. He staggered as if under a physical blow, then let out a wail of astonished pain. The robe flew aside as his skin began to peel from his body, strips falling from the spine, unwinding from his neck, yanking like pared apple skin from his legs. Snape watched the flesh revealed without flinching. He had charred out the part of himself that should be horrified by such things, he thought. Or the Marauders had done it for him.

"As the poet says," breathed Rosier. "I pray thee sigh not, speak not, draw not breath; let life burn down, and dream it is not death." His laughter returned then, sharp and high. "Except that it is. It always is."

"Howard!" cried someone inside the house, and then out came a witch with long, pale hair. A sudden flash of light from the fire revealed that she bore the yellow eyes of a pureblood Light family.

Rosier tilted his head at Snape. "That one's yours," he said. "I prefer them younger." He glided forward, aiming for the house where the Mudblood children lay. He easily avoided the charge of the red-haired wizard who sprang out, and who soon saw Malfoy anyway and ran

forward with a shout. Snape concealed a smirk as he caught a brief glimpse of Malfoy's face. Lucius had not known that Gideon Prewett was here, and the chances that he would be able to defeat him all by himself were extremely small.

And then Snape was alone with his victim. A Vance, he knew that, but he could not remember her first name.

She stared at him, one hand scrambling for her wand, caught between her terror for the wizard Rosier had flayed and her terror of him and the shock of the attack and the horror of it all. Snape held her eyes, and did not look away as he raised his own wand.

Every Death Eater initiation was different. For some, Lord Voldemort would require that they did something they personally found repugnant, such as killing a child, to show their dedication to his cause. For others, they had to use a bloody, torturous spell, rather than the painless Killing Curse. And for still others, the test was a test of emotion.

The Dark Lord had told Snape to commit a murder in a certain frame of mind. Then the Lord would read his mind when he came back to the Death Eaters and learn if he had actually done as he had been instructed.

Snape had never murdered before. He wondered, distantly, if he should have felt some hesitation. Gryffindors would have said yes. Even some of his fellow Slytherins would have said so. They bragged about practicing Crucio, but they would have gone faint and sick if they had seen it used on a human being, rather than the rats and spiders they found to practice with.

But none of them knew the lessons that Snape's mother had already taught him by the time he entered Hogwarts at eleven. The Dark Arts take a steady hand and a clear mind. And, above all, you must not care that much.

Snape met the witch's eyes, and said, "Ardesco."

The flames exploded from within the Vance woman's body just as she readied her wand. She screamed and screamed as her eyeballs blazed from behind with the fire, as her hair caught flame from underneath, as her bones were briefly outlined against her skin with the sheer intensity of it. Usually, that curse took some time to kill, giving the victim a chance to counteract it, but Snape had cast with considerable power and care. She died, but the death was concentrated into a few seconds of endless pain.

He watched, and he noticed the way that her skin smelled as she fell, and the blackened smears her crisped hair cast on the grass. Then he turned and walked to the house. Behind him, Malfoy was battling more and more fiercely with Prewett, but that was to be expected. Snape was not blind, even if the others were, to the consequences of the Dark Lord sending Malfoy to a house where that wizard lurked. Malfoy had failed to defeat him time and again, and the Dark Lord wanted only the strongest to serve him.

He peered into the house, and saw that it was done, the Mudblood children dismembered. Rosier sat in the middle of one bed, tracing a hand in the liquids. He was chewing on something. Snape thought it was a heel, with a large strip of flesh still attached. He glanced up at Snape, blinked, and swallowed.

"Any trouble?" he asked.

Snape smirked. "Malfoy is having some trouble with one of the Prewett twins," he said.

"Let him have trouble," said Rosier comfortably. "They won't kill each other." He lay back and closed his eyes in bliss as the blood crept under his robes. Snape wrinkled his nose. He could not imagine bathing in the liquid; it would dry into a sticky mess that would prove hard to clean off later. But Rosier evidently enjoyed it.

There were few Death Eaters like Rosier, and Snape was just as glad.

He lifted his head as he felt the alteration in the night around them. It was not merely the cessation of curses from outside, which indicated Prewett had once again escaped. It was the arrival of that deep,

earthy power that he had felt around him when Malfoy had taken him to meet his Lord. He turned to the door and fell on one knee moments before the night parted to reveal Lord Voldemort.

Rosier let out a small, happy sound. "I would kneel, my lord," he said, "but this bed is so warm."

Voldemort laughed, a hissing sound that seemed to come from the back of the house more than from in front of them. "I will grant you that concession, Evan," he said. "And Severus."

Snape lifted his head and met the Dark Lord's eyes. He felt the Legilimency sweep into his mind, a casual scything, looking for the emotions he had felt when he killed the Vance witch.

He showed his Lord everything, of course. He had no reason not to. It was true. He had joined the Death Eaters to have revenge on his enemies, but he would not run into battle madly shouting, a liability to his Lord's larger cause. His rage was not even smoldering embers. What was left was the cold ashes of bitterness, and the wormwood satisfaction of inflicting losses, of any kind, on the hypocrites and liars and braggart children of the Light.

Snape had changed from even as much as a month ago, when he had first met the Dark Lord. He had had a chance to walk among and work with the other Death Eaters, and he had seen what they were. He knew he was beyond them, save perhaps the mad Rosier, who genuinely did enjoy what he did. He was not touched by what he did. He had no personal rivalries as Malfoy did with the Weasleys, no desire to seek out the Marauders before anyone else. What he had was the ability to do anything, as long as it hurt the Light.

Voldemort was smiling, he realized when he looked up. "Very good," said the Dark Lord, softly, and then lifted his wand, yew body and phoenix feather core, symbols of resurrection. "Bare your left arm."

Snape did as he was told, never taking his eyes from his Lord's. The smile might have a touch of genuine amusement to it now, Snape thought. That did not matter. He knew exactly what he was here for, and what the Dark Lord could give him.

“Severus Snape,” said Voldemort, “wizard, son of Eileen Prince, do you consent to serve me all the days of your life?”

“I do,” said Snape. He could accept a lifetime of torturing and killing and hurting those who hurt him, he thought. Easily. The satisfaction was worth it.

“And do you consent to be loyal to me, putting my goals and not your own first, for as long as you shall live and carry the Dark Mark?”

“I do.” Snape saw a gleam far back in Voldemort’s deep eyes, and knew he was signing his freedom away. He did not care. Freedom had never brought him revenge.

“Do you consent to wear my Mark upon your skin, and take no steps to remove or alter it?”

“I do.”

“Morsmordre!”

And the Dark Mark formed on his skin.

Snape had never felt any pain like this pain. Crucio did not compare. Knives slashed his skin open, his flesh, his bone, and imprinted the Dark Mark deep, deep, deep, into the core of his being.

Against the temptation to flinch, however, Snape brought up all the memories of the times that his mother had told him what his blood meant, all the times he had succeeded in class only to be passed over in favor of those who had higher status or looked better, all the times he had learned that his magic, his very power, meant nothing, that he was nothing, that he was a scrap of being.

He countered pain with pain, and he did not flinch, and he did not scream.

He looked up, and Voldemort was smiling at him. "Our next attack shall be on a family the old fool, Albus Dumbledore, would give much to defend," he said softly.

And Snape felt something like peace.

Interlude: The Liberator's Third Letter

August 27th, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

You may be wondering why you have not heard from me in some time. For that, I can only apologize. My family has grown increasingly paranoid over recent events. They seem to fear that the Light will lose its prominence in our world to Dark purebloods. And anyone could be a traitor selling out to the Dark, particularly their youngest daughter, who has not adopted their attitudes towards the Light and the Order of the Phoenix with as much enthusiasm as the rest of her family. So they have kept a closer watch on me, and sometimes searched my rooms for ink and parchment. My will to aid you remains strong, but the means of doing so have been almost taken from me.

I have more names for you:

-Paul Fredericks. You know him as a Granian breeder, I'm sure, and associated with Shield of the Granian. It's true that his economic interests occupy him more than anything else, but he thinks, and is probably right, that the Light will favor his interests more than the Dark. He has been in contact with Order of the Phoenix members whom Hestia Jones contacted. So I overheard my mother saying to my father.

-Keep a close eye on Pharos Starrise. It's true that he's not the power his uncle was, but my father has mentioned him, and thinks that very weakness is what might make him turn to the Light in different ways than his uncle did. If his name has been brought up in my hearing, I am sure that it can mean nothing good.

-I do have more information on Falco Parkinson for you. He walks the "paths" that Lord-level wizards are sometimes tempted by. These paths lead through Light and Dark, and both of them grant him powers in the hopes of seducing him to their sides. In particular, I have found that he can bend time. This is not exactly what a Time-Turner does; he cannot go back into the past, and he does not have to take a care with meeting himself. What it allows him to do is get

from one time to another without simply waiting through the hours or days in between. He vanishes from one and then appears in another—rather like a prolonged Apparition. He uses it mainly to hide from his enemies, as they cannot find him in the wizarding world while he bends time. However, from what my parents have said, this power is not perfect. He may look for a Time-Turner or other artifact, such as one in the Department of Mysteries, to enhance it. Please watch for this, and guard your artifacts accordingly.

It has taken me five days to write all this information down, taking advantage of rare moments when I am alone, which is why the date is written last next to my signature. I sincerely hope that my owl finds you well, Minister Scrimgeour. You are the best hope of the Light, as I know that the vates cannot Declare, and Falco Parkinson is Light in name only. Like Dumbledore, he will use any means to secure his ends. And the Order of the Phoenix is more aimed at destroying the man who destroyed their leader, or serving Parkinson, than in carrying the fight against the Dark Lord forward.

I work for freedom.

Yours,

The Liberator.

Chapter Nineteen: A Most Tumultuous First Day

Refusing people seems to have become a regular feature of my life, Harry thought. "No," he said aloud.

Camellia frowned and let one hand smooth across her head. She would probably regrow the hair that had burned in Snape's *Ardesco* at some point in the future, but Madam Pomfrey hadn't managed to save it. "It's true that we wouldn't have much to do in the school," she said, "but it would be a comfort for some of us to be close to our alpha. And—"

"There are many reasons I'd like you to stay away from Hogwarts," said Harry. "Most are practical. There are parents who won't like you so near their children. You won't have much to do there. Where you would stay becomes a problem. What happens if someone offends you near the full moon becomes a problem." Camellia flushed. Harry clenched his hand into a fist briefly, wishing that either Camellia or Snape would tell him what they'd said to each other. So far, though, Snape had refused with his silence and Camellia had simply refused. I cannot force it from them. "And what you would do if someone threatened me becomes a problem."

Camellia blinked. "It does?"

"Of course it does," said Harry. "The majority of the people who might threaten me at Hogwarts are children, Camellia. They do it because of a sudden flash of temper or because I've hurt a member of their family, not because they're Death Eaters." He resolutely pushed away the memory of those Death Eaters who had turned out to be present in Hogwarts last year. "They don't deserve the pack to pile snarling on them for that."

"You need someone to protect you," Camellia said.

"I'll have that," Harry said. "Peter will be there. Henrietta Bulstrode, whom I believe you mentioned being impressed with, will be there. McGonagall will be there, and while she can't protect me at the expense of other students, she won't let them hurt me just for amusement, either." He almost said Snape would be there, but he

wasn't sure how much he wanted Snape to think about defending him. Better for him to concentrate on his healing. "Draco will be there, and he keeps a closer eye on me than anyone else. And Connor will be there. He's rash, but he's got much better at dueling now, and he's my brother."

For a moment, Camellia paced in a circle. Harry folded his arms. They were in the middle of the large room where the pack liked to sleep all together in a pile, but it was empty now. Harry supposed the others had wanted to leave him and Camellia some privacy. That wouldn't stop them from demanding to know what he had said when Camellia left the room, of course.

"Take a few from the pack with you," Camellia murmured, pleading. "Including me. And Trumpetflower. She's a pureblood witch. She could help you with your alliances. She knows things about wizarding society that I never will."

Harry let out a long breath, doing his best not to make it sound like a sigh. "I'm sorry. No. I've thought about this. If the werewolf situation wasn't so delicate right now, and if I thought I was in serious threat of bodily harm at Hogwarts, then yes, I might consider it. But not now."

Camellia dropped to a knee abruptly and bowed her head. Harry jumped and glanced over his shoulder, wondering if someone else had come in, but the study door was still firmly closed.

When he turned back, Camellia murmured, "Loki never—separated from us for as long a period as you plan on. He understood the closeness of pack to alpha, and why we need it. Please, I beg you, Wild, do as he did."

"Choose another alpha?" Harry asked.

Camellia jerked her head up, eyes frantic. "Of course not! Stay here with us, or allow us to follow you where you go."

"I'm sorry," Harry said softly. "I am willing to pass on the position of responsibility, but not to put you in danger, as you would be if you went out in public right now—especially as Loki's former pack." His

letters and articles had not done the good Harry hoped they might. The Prophet exploded with more and more reports of fear each day, wondering if werewolves were conspiring to murder the whole of the Ministry and speculating that each unusual magical crime was the work of “werewolf anarchists.” The full moon had passed, but the hysteria had not died out. Harry doubted it would any time soon.

“Most alphas would not do this,” Camellia said, rocking back on her heels and staring at him.

“I know,” said Harry. “Which might make me a good alpha for the summer, but not otherwise. But we should discuss this with the rest of the pack, Camellia. Allow them to make the decision whether they want me to remain in this position, or choose someone else.”

Camellia bit her lip until a small trickle of blood ran down her chin. “There is no simply yielding to what we want, is there?” she asked.

Harry shook his head. “I used to do that,” he said. “I’ve even done it recently. But not only is it impossible now with so many conflicting claims on me, it’s insulting. Who am I to think that someone else can’t function without my presence? Who am I to try to just offer comfort when comfort might not be what that other person wants?” He caught Camellia’s eye. “If someone refuses to come to me and say what I can do to aid the festering wrong in her soul, then who am I to presume that I know what that wrong is and how to deal with it?”

Camellia’s face flushed utterly red. She said, “There are—links that can be made even without your being a werewolf, Wild. A share in the packmind, for example. Then you could know what we think without our having to speak it aloud.”

“I’ve read about that,” said Harry. And he had, as he spent whatever free time he had in the last few days researching on the werewolf cure potion. “It means that I would consider the pack’s priorities mine. Doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Camellia reluctantly. “Its purpose is to drown insecurities and help new werewolves feel welcome among their peers.”

Harry reached down and squeezed her shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't. I can try to give you what you need, but I can't be just your alpha."

Camellia muttered something, but then stood, padding across the room to open the study door and summon the rest of the pack. Harry braced himself. He knew whom he would choose as alpha if the pack wanted a new one, but he had the sinking sensation that they would not.

Draco winced as the slam of a trunk lid echoed down the hall. Harry had been packed before last night, and Draco had carefully tucked his clothing and his textbooks away this morning. That left only one candidate who would have to make so much noise.

Draco slid out through the door of his and Harry's room and made his way towards Potter's. It stood half-open, so, satisfyingly, Draco was able to slide around it and into the room before Harry's brother noticed him. When he caught a glimpse of Draco from the corner of his eye, he yelped and stumbled over his feet, sitting down hard on his arse.

Draco fought to keep from laughing. In the end, he found that letting a small smirk cross his face got his point across so much more efficiently.

"Prat," Potter hissed at him, standing up. "What do you want?"

"I thought a herd of rampaging hippogriffs had broken into the house, and I was coming to defend Harry's property," Draco said lazily. His hand dropped to rest on his wand. "I see that wasn't necessary." He eyed Potter's trunks. One was shut, but barely so; the locking spell on it might falter at any moment. The other still stood open, and despite being filled with many shrunken packages, was near to overflowing. "Honestly, Potter, couldn't you pack with a bit more class?"

Potter twisted his head as if he intended to gnaw at himself like a dog with fleas. Draco did so hope that was his Animagus form; it would be amusing. "Am I disturbing your delicate sensibilities, Malfoy?" he

asked. "Of course, that wouldn't be hard to do given that I'm a halfblood, would it?"

Draco felt most of the amusement leave him in a moment. He narrowed his eyes. Infuriatingly, this just made Potter smirk.

"I forgot that just being in the same house with someone like me made you disgusted," he mocked. Draco said nothing, but the effort it took him to do was enormous. "I forgot that you hate people for who their ancestors are, until, of course, you have to apply that hatred to yourself. Then you just insist the shagging didn't happen. Too late this time, I think. What with it splashed all over the front page of the newspaper—"

"Shut up," said Draco, and the effort it took him to do that instead of cast a curse was almost inhuman.

Potter rolled his eyes. "When you wake up to reality, Malfoy." He took a step forward. Draco wondered if this combination of rage and frustration was what Snape had felt before he cast *Ardesco* at the werewolf. "It's simple, really. You can't go on singing about your pureblood superiority the way you used to do without being a hypocrite. What's so hard to understand? Would you rather go on being a hypocrite? Or would you rather wake up and admit what the rest of us have known for two years—that you love someone who's part of that world you hate so much, so singing about pureblood superiority is just a bit of a conflict of interest? Doesn't it comfort you, your newfound heritage? It makes you more like Harry, after all, and that was what I thought you wanted."

Draco breathed through his nose, fighting away the temptation to leap out of his body and take possession of Potter's. Those words distracted him too much, bringing up memories of fourth year when he was desperate enough to risk his life on the chance that he could become magically equal to Harry, and made it the more likely that he would hurt the git if he controlled him now.

Potter took another step, and then his eyes went over Draco's head. Draco knew who was standing in the doorway, even before he smelled the scent of roses. This smelled like rose petals, actually,

brewing in a potion. Draco congratulated himself for noting that subtle difference. That meant that Harry was quietly angry, and incredibly disgusted.

"That will be enough, Connor," said Harry. "Enough. Merlin. Do you use a Time-Turner that replaces you with your third-year self on occasion?"

Potter frowned, then swallowed, obviously dealing with painful memories of his own. "It was just insults," he said. "Not curses."

Harry came forward to stand next to Draco, and slip an arm around his waist. Draco again didn't have to say anything. He just raised his eyebrows. Potter flushed to the roots of his hair.

"Incredibly vicious insults, aimed to hurt," said Harry. "Aimed to push Draco over the border into striking at you, I should think. And that's just stupid, Connor. I might end up angry with Draco, but you'd also be hurt, and I don't think Draco would be as reluctant to tell me the truth about what happened as Snape was."

He glanced at Draco from the corner of his eye for confirmation, and Draco shook his head. Harry let out a sighing little breath, and then turned a look on Potter that made Draco chuckle. Potter glared. Harry didn't appear to have heard his laughter at all.

"And then I'd be angry with you." Harry's voice had dropped lower. "The way I am right now, as a matter of fact. This kind of stupidity ought not to happen even if you didn't have Snape and Camellia's example right in front of you. That you do makes it inexcusable."

"I'm sorry, Harry." Potter's eyes had lowered, and his face burned with such vivid color now that Draco wished Weasley was standing in the same room for comparison's sake. He'd always thought Weasley was the reddest blusher he'd ever seen, but now he wasn't sure. "But he did start it. He came into my room and asked me why I couldn't pack more quietly, and I said—"

"I heard what you said," Harry interrupted. "And the fact remains that you went too far, Connor. And it was calculated, not something you

did innocently. I hate that. I'm not in the mood to talk to you much right now."

"I'm sorry—"

"Apologize to Draco, not me."

Potter glanced away. Draco looked at Harry in time to see his mouth tighten.

"I thought not," said Harry. "You really didn't care about hurting him." He let out a few controlled breaths, then said, "I thought the other things you did, the prank and the teasing the day the Grand Unified Theory was published, were either to try and make me have fun, or innocent, the mistakes of a child. Now I'm not so sure about that."

"Harry, I'm sorry, I said that—"

"And not to the right person." Harry shook his head, then turned away, speaking to Draco as if Potter had ceased to exist. "Are you all packed? I think we should leave for the station in fifteen minutes at the most. Granted, it won't take us a lot of time to walk from the Floo connection, but—"

Draco moved gracefully along at Harry's side, this time ignoring the temptation to glance back at Potter. Self-control made winning an argument so much more fun. His glee was the sweeter when he didn't show it.

Harry slipped the school robe over his head, grateful for the fact that the ride on the Hogwarts Express—the first one he'd taken since his first year—had been quiet. He doubted that would continue once he arrived at the school, but a period of time in which he could just talk to Draco, without someone appearing to demand his help or insult his boyfriend, was priceless.

He swallowed back anger at Connor. It was no use yelling. That wouldn't work. Lashing out with his magic was even less productive. Silent treatment and cold waiting worked best with Connor, giving him nothing to latch onto so that he could convince himself he was the

poorly treated one—and giving his temper time to cool down, so he could actually think.

Harry would rather the whole insulting session this morning hadn't happened, of course. He had listened in growing disbelief; he had thought his brother more mature than that. And now it turned out he wasn't, and it had forced Harry to evaluate several things about the last few weeks that he had thought were innocent.

He was not pleased.

To keep himself from sliding back into brooding, he laughed wryly and shook his head. Simultaneous living. That's what has to happen. I'll have to change my mind all the time in the process of living. I keep saying that to people. It just struck a little closer to home this time than normal.

A swift movement outside the window caught his attention. Draco had gone to the loo, so Harry was alone in their compartment. He frowned and turned, keeping his body back from the window even as he craned his neck to look. Old lessons drummed in his head. If you're standing behind glass when it shatters, you'll take glass in the face, and won't be able to fight.

He could imagine that it was his own voice and not Lily's sometimes, if he concentrated.

The large, graceful shape that curvetted past the window, moving incredibly fast, couldn't be imagined to be anything other than what it was. A Granian, Harry thought. The swiftest of the flying horses, and probably the most beautiful; this one was dapple gray.

Harry remembered the symbol carved on the wooden coins that the attackers in the Ministry had thrown at him and Draco, and prepared a Protego to shield himself against flying glass. A hoof could cave in the window quite easily.

The Granian didn't kick it in, however. It flew past again, or perhaps that was a different one. Harry could make out a rider in robes on its

back, but not much else, given its speed. The rider had his hood pulled over his face, anyway.

Harry narrowed his eyes. What in the world are they trying to accomplish? It's not as if attacking me would do much good now, when they've forewarned me. And they can't see much through the windows if it's simply regular spying. Accompanying the train until it enters an ambush? Once again, they shouldn't have shown themselves. What are they—

“Harry!”

Argutus settled like a warm loop around his head and shoulders. Harry put up his hand to stroke him, while watching as the same Granian, or another, went past a third time. No, definitely not spying, not when they don't slow down enough to peer in the train. “Not now, Argutus. I'm watching—”

“There's an omen!”

Harry glanced down at the shimmering coils wreathed around his neck, and caught his breath. Gray shapes moved above a long, dark one vaguely recognizable as the Hogwarts Express; the vision sharpened as he watched. In the midst of it was a crouching figure with white-blond hair.

And Harry remembered the angle of the wooden coins thrown during the attack in the Ministry, and understood what Shield of the Granian wanted.

The coins came from the side. They could have thrown them more directly at me, if I'm really the one they wanted to hurt, or at Camellia and Rose, if they were the targets.

They were aiming for Draco. And swooping around up here keeps my attention away from what's happening in the back of the train.

Harry turned and held out his hand. The door of the compartment came flying open, and almost off its hinges. Harry ducked out and past the students who were traveling from one compartment to

another as the Express slowed, or seeking a private place to change into school robes. He felt his elbows impact with ribs, and he stumbled on cloth, and there was indignant squealing from throats all around him.

Shit. They're going to keep me from getting to Draco in time, Harry thought.

Then Argutus reared up on his shoulder, and gave a hiss that echoed up and down the train. The students nearest to Harry wasted no time plastering themselves against the walls. Harry ran up the corridor towards the back of the train. Over the clatter of the wheels on the track and the shrill whistle, he still thought he could hear a sharp, scraping sound—like the impact of hooves with metal.

A burly Gryffindor seventh-year loomed in front of him, the Head Boy badge gleaming on his chest. Harry had no time to stop and see who it was, and he didn't care about the arm lifted to stop him. He simply dropped and rolled under it, then came back to his feet just beyond and pounded on.

A pale flash from the side, and then he heard a fired curse, followed by one of the more ordinary variety. Harry whipped himself around, feet skidding as he halted his momentum, and Argutus hissed in protest as his shoulder impacted hard with the wall.

Draco was crouching in an empty compartment, his wand lifted and still trembling with the aftermath of cast magic. He wore his school robes, tie, and the Prefect's badge that had come to him since Blaise Zabini had left the school last year. A small hole had been stamped in the roof above him, and Draco had probably thrown his spell through that. Given the speed of the Granians, Harry wasn't at all surprised that he'd missed.

"Draco!"

He turned and glanced at Harry, and at that moment something small fell through the hole, aiming straight at him. Harry caught a glimpse of glass, and all his senses trembled with ringing magic of the kind he

had faced in the Ministry when the Unspeakables cast a similar globe at him.

He didn't have much time to make a decision. He thrust out his hand and shouted, "Accio globe!"

The glass projectile changed direction in midair and flew at him. Harry ducked to avoid letting it touch his bare skin, and heard it hit the compartment door above him and shatter.

Whatever had been inside it fell on him. Harry twisted again, trying to make sure the brunt didn't hit Argutus. He felt some kind of wet dust drape his face, and a bruising sensation grabbed his belly.

The sensation quickly grew worse, and Harry felt his head roll towards his belly, as if he were a carpet. He braced his own magic against it.

And felt, impossibly, his own magic drain away from him. He might as well have tried to grip running water.

"Harry!"

Draco could have been shouting for help, or shouting his name in distress. Harry didn't know. What mattered was that he had to understand what was happening to him before he could stop it.

His magic continued to run away from him, contracting inside him. Harry closed his eyes and concentrated on his scar. No, Voldemort was not nearby, and he didn't think any other absorbers existed in Britain right now. It wasn't that.

Golden light filled his vision, and deafening phoenix song his ears. And then there was familiar pain in his head.

The phoenix web, Harry thought in incredulity. No. How is it returning? I didn't hear anyone say the incantation, and it would explain why my magic is diminishing, but—

And then he realized his body felt strangely light, except for an unfamiliar weight at the end of his left wrist. Opening his eyes confirmed it. His limbs were smaller, and he had—

He had two hands again.

They're turning me younger. And putting the phoenix web back on me at the same time.

The dust in the globe!

He lifted a frantic hand to wipe at his face, and then felt a tongue sweep past his fingers, picking it up. Argutus let out a surprised hiss a moment later, and his weight on Harry's shoulders abruptly lessened, but he didn't stop licking at the dust.

Draco was shouting somewhere in there too, and water struck Harry's face, sluicing off some of the dust. Harry spat, in case it had got in his mouth, and rubbed his back and shoulders frantically against the wall. He couldn't do anything with his magic, which kept slipping away from him when he reached it. He suspected that the changes the phoenix web had gone through when he was thirteen or twelve were so numerous that his magic couldn't keep adjusting to them so fast, and couldn't remain available to him.

Draco shouted again, and then Harry hissed as all the moisture vanished from his skin—the dust, his sweat, the slick wetness Argutus had left behind as he licked at him. His mouth hurt terribly, as dry as it was, but he had stopped changing. He had control of his magic again.

He opened the gulf of his absorbere ability as wide as it would go, and began to swallow the foreign magic of the dust that still lingered on him. It was an odd sensation, as if the snake he envisioned the magic-swallowing gift as were steadily lengthening. The magic gushed into him, and Harry felt his bones creak as he grew again. The phoenix web blew past his eyes in a confused flurry of light and song, and vanished.

And the hand he had resting on his left cheek vanished.

Harry grimaced, but didn't allow himself to stop draining the magic until he was sure there was none of the dust left. Then he could open his eyes and nod to Draco, licking his lips to urge some saliva into his mouth.

"Clever, with the dehydration spell," he murmured. "Thank you."

Draco nodded, and turned around to stare at the hole in the ceiling of the compartment again. "What was that?" he demanded. "Why in the world were they attacking us like that?"

Harry shook his head, unable to talk more right now. He looked at Argutus. The Omen snake was smaller, but not as young as Harry had feared. He was darting his tongue out thoughtfully now.

"It tastes like mice," he explained, when he caught Harry watching him.

Harry snorted in helpless laughter, even as he scanned Draco once more. "They didn't hit you with anything?"

"No, only you." Draco had put his wand away, but the hand he touched his face with shook. "Why did they do that?"

Harry waved his hand at the wall of the compartment. "Speculum caelum," he whispered, and a small, transparent mirror appeared in his palm. Harry studied it closely. It showed the sky outside the Express, and while the sky gleamed with gray clouds, as was usual this time of year in Scotland, he could see no sign of Granians.

"I suppose they attacked trying to deage you," he said. "But they didn't have any other weapons that would do it, and they didn't want to attack the train as a whole. They probably have some children on here themselves. When they realized the attack had failed, they fled."

"That was aimed at me?"

Harry looked up. "Of course it was," he said. "So was the attack in the Ministry. They threw the coins from your side. I was near enough that I could have been hurt, but you're what they wanted."

Draco's mouth tightened. "Trying to cripple you?"

"I would assume so," said Harry, "but assumptions are stupid at this point. It could also have been a strike at your father, or trying to remove you from the game. If someone had heard rumors of your possession ability, for example, they might think you're too dangerous to live."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I used it on the battlefield with the Death Eaters," he said. "And I told Scrimgeour about it."

"I don't want to think that the Minister told anyone," said Harry. "But with the Unspeakables involved? That globe they flung was an Unspeakable artifact. I think we can safely assume that. They could have read it out of Scrimgeour's mind, or he might have told them because he assumes he can trust them." He hesitated, then added reluctantly, "Or perhaps they sensed you moving through their minds that day I visited Scrimgeour with the Pensieve, and just waited until now to get their revenge."

"They can't have been responsible for that first attack, if that's the case," Draco reminded him.

"I know," said Harry. "But I think this is an alliance between Shield of the Granian and the Unspeakables. The Unspeakables would have used a more direct kind of attack if they were working on their own, after what happened at the Maenad Press."

Draco nodded. "So we can't be sure what they want, but we can be sure that they want to attack me as well as you."

"That's right." Harry studied him again. Draco still remained unwounded, but the look in his eyes... Harry held out his arms.

Draco shook his head, but came over and embraced him. Argutus wriggled out of the way with a complaint about being smothered.

Harry focused his magic on the Omen snake for a moment. He could sense no adverse effects from the dust. Argutus had grown younger again, smaller, about the size he'd been before the last time he shed his skin. But the dust didn't appear to be a poison.

Of course not, Harry thought, remembering the facts Honoria had learned from Hornblower. They seek to capture, not kill.

He gave a violent shiver and tightened his hold on Draco. Draco didn't move, didn't object, didn't say anything, but Harry could feel the tension in his muscles as he leaned his head on Harry's shoulder.

All they've done is earn themselves another enemy, Harry thought, and used that idea to distract himself from thoughts of what would have happened if Draco had died or been captured.

Harry couldn't help keeping an eye on the heavens as they climbed out of the carriage near the front doors of Hogwarts, but he still saw nothing. It was evening, anyway, and the clouds were drawing in, spitting rain. Not ideal Granian flying weather, but then, the Express was hardly an ideal place for them to attack.

He stepped up to the front of the carriage and spent a moment touching the noses of the thestrals who drew it. The great horses turned their heads and watched him. Stroking their fur left a slick of cool dampness on Harry's skin, but he didn't mind. It grounded him, and made the thoughts chasing around his head settle.

"I have to go to the Headmistress before the Sorting Feast begins," he explained, when he saw Draco watching him. "She needs to know about the attack on the Express, and I don't think it can wait until tomorrow."

Draco nodded. "I'm coming with you."

Harry relaxed. Stupid as it might be, he didn't want Draco out of his sight right now.

He strode into Hogwarts, making for the Headmistress's office, Draco keeping pace with him all the way. People called out his name, and

Harry waved at them distractedly. He wanted to talk about multiple things with everyone around him, yes, but informing McGonagall was his priority for right now.

“Harry!”

That was Connor’s voice, coming from behind him. Harry’s back tightened, and he heard Draco make a noise like a tiger interrupted at dinner. But he kept walking, counting footsteps in his mind, and ducked away neatly just as Connor’s hand tried to clamp down on his shoulder blade.

“Where were you going so fast?” Connor demanded, sprinting around in front of him. His hazel eyes were too bright, his cheeks flushed with more than the effort of running. “What happened on the train?”

“An attack,” said Harry shortly. “If you really want to hear about it, come with us so that you can be there when we tell McGonagall. We don’t want to linger now, and we don’t want to tell the story twice.” He heard Draco’s noise stop. Well, good. Perhaps it’s knowing I won’t make an exception for Connor.

“I wanted to apologize,” Connor said. “And see if you were all right. And, Harry—”

“Later, Connor. Come with us or stay behind.” Harry turned intently towards the stairs. He didn’t look back to see if Connor was following or not. McGonagall might already be on her way down with the Sorting Hat, and he didn’t want to delay the Feast too long, either.

He met her on the stairs a few meters from her office. McGonagall wore slightly fancier robes than she had last year. Harry wondered if she were moving slowly into the role Dumbledore had occupied before he fell, then dismissed the notion. He had a story to tell first.

“Harry,” McGonagall said, frowning. “Mr. Malfoy. Mr. Potter.” From that last, Harry knew Connor must have followed them after all. “What happened?”

“An attack on the train,” said Harry, and saw her eyes darken. This was the Headmistress he remembered from the time Rovenan had used the Entrail-Expelling Curse on him last year. “Several Granian-riders cut a hole in the compartment where Draco changed his robes and then dropped an artifact at him. I’m sure the artifact came from the Department of Mysteries. It was a small globe filled with the magic of time, and when it shattered, it dropped a wet dust that succeeded in reversing time for me to the point where I was twelve or thirteen. By the time I fought free of it with Draco’s help, the Granians were gone.” With each word, it seemed, the Headmistress’s face grew grimmer, and Harry finished with, “I’m not sure if another attack like that will happen again. I did want to warn you.”

“You did the right thing, Mr. Pott—Harry,” said McGonagall, shaking her head. She had been one of those who had a hard time adapting when he renounced his last name, Harry thought, and the habit of four years was still difficult for her to break. “We will speak more of this later, when the Feast is done. There are things I have been meaning to discuss with you anyway.” She paused, studying him. “For now, I will say that I take your safety as seriously as I take the safety of any student here. I will not tolerate your enemies following you onto Hogwarts grounds in order to take revenge or pursue their political disagreements. I ask that you take reasonable precautions, and keep your sworn companions or others with you as much as possible.”

Harry nodded. Owen and Michael would be happy to take up the slack where they could, and he had no intention of doing without their guardianship, if only because it would also provide protection for Draco. “Thank you, Madam.”

McGonagall nodded, and then swept past them. She wasn’t quite as intimidating as Snape, Harry thought, but she looked regal.

He turned around, and Connor was staring at him. “All of that really happened?” he asked in a small voice.

“Yes,” Harry said. He wondered if he should refrain from saying anything else—he was still angry at Connor because of what had happened this morning—but decided that a few words would do him

more good than silence right now. "I don't appreciate threats to Draco," he told Connor. "Of any kind."

Connor flushed as he had that morning, and nodded, stepping out of the way. Harry paused, but he made no apology as he'd said he wanted to. Harry hissed between his teeth and headed back down the stairs.

Draco waited until they were away from Connor to speak, at least, which was an unanticipated courtesy. "I can defend myself, Harry. Does that mean I can hex him with your approval, if he threatens me again?"

Harry glanced at him sideways. "You're more likely to get in trouble for it here," he said. "House points taken, and all."

"Mother taught me to recognize that," Draco said, his face relaxing into a smile for some absurd reason. "It's called 'dodging the question,' Harry."

Harry sighed. "As you pointed out, you can defend yourself," he said. "And I concede the point that Connor's motives are not what I thought they were. On the other hand, think about the consequences of hexing anyone who annoys you, Draco. There are more Slytherin ways to go about things."

Draco considered that as they passed into the Great Hall and headed for the Slytherin table; they were nearly the last to arrive, but Millicent had saved them places next to her. Just as they sat down, the smile returned, a near-smirk this time, blossoming across Draco's face.

"Hmmm," was the only thing he said.

Harry shook his head and turned his attention to the first of the first-years, sitting under the Hat. He couldn't plan ahead for what might happen between Draco and Connor. That was insulting to them, too, at least as much as to imply that Draco couldn't defend himself. He could only react as things happened, and hope they didn't hurt each other too badly.

And that neither of them crosses the alliance oaths, and forces me to cast them out. Connor had sworn to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow the day after Harry brought him back from Lux Aeterna.

“SLYTHERIN!” the Hat shouted. The small, dark-haired girl whipped it from her head, beaming, and ran for their table.

Harry shouted a welcome as his contribution to the applause of his Housemates, and decided to think about nothing for a time but guessing where the first-years would go.

Minerva nodded as the last of the first-years went into Ravenclaw, and then stood. For a long moment, she scanned the Great Hall, letting her eyes rest on an anxious face there, a perturbed one here, someone red-faced and on the verge of crying—that was a first-year in Gryffindor, obviously stunned by his Sorting into that House, whom she would make sure to bring to Peter’s attention—and then sweep down the head table. Peter gave her a calm look. Henrietta Bulstrode was grinning; she did that often. Severus sat in silence with his Seer beside him, white to the lips. That, too, had become usual in the past few days.

She looked at Harry last. He had a composed mask on, and seemed to be waiting for her speech with as much impatience as any other teenage boy, so that he could eat.

Minerva let out a deep breath, and began.

“Welcome to another year at Hogwarts,” she said. “Welcome to our new students and our old—and to our new professors as well. Peter Pettigrew will be taking over from Acies Merryweather as Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts and Head of Gryffindor House.” A smattering of polite applause for that, mostly from the Gryffindors; they hadn’t had the time to get to know Peter last year, as he’d only been at Hogwarts for a few short weeks before the Midsummer battle. “Hilda Belluspersona is our new Transfiguration Professor.” That brought some more clapping. Minerva wondered if it came from the fact that Henrietta looked more approachable, or from the fact that Peter had a criminal record.

She braced her hands on the table and leaned forward. The easy part of her speech was over.

“The events of the end of last year have revealed a few simple truths,” she said. “I hope that you will keep those truths in mind as you attend Hogwarts this year.” Albus, she reflected, would have arranged for the older students to hear this in private—but then, Albus had recruited the older students, mostly Gryffindor ones, as soldiers in the last war. Minerva did not intend to do so, and she also did not intend to let her charges die for lack of information.

“We are at war,” she said, and heard some of the first-years suck in their breaths. “Some of you have fought in that war. Others were victims of it, or related to its victims. Lord Voldemort may attack again. The wards are strong, and our determination to protect you is stronger, but if we forget we are at war, terrible things may happen.” She suppressed a grim smile she doubted her students would understand, and made sure it came out as more comforting. Alastor Moody had spent a good amount of the summer at Hogwarts, setting up wards that mimicked the ones on the secure portions of the Ministry. She supposed his theme of constant vigilance had worked its way into her own head.

She had reason of her own to believe it, of course. She had lived through the war with Grindelwald, though she had been a student herself at the time, and then through the First War with Voldemort. It had been Albus’s leadership she’d looked to for comfort two decades ago, but the first time, she had invented and repeated her own maxim to herself, again and again. Lions do not sleep in times of danger.

And if she was a lioness now, all these children were her cubs. She was not about to close her eyes and leave them vulnerable.

Or to each other.

“Those terrible things often involve students at Hogwarts turning on each other,” Minerva told her students, who were listening to her in a silence that seemed to ring with other voices shouting her words. “Traitors can break the strongest wards, the most vigilant guardianship. Traitors are not doubters, I would have you understand.

Doubting, thinking, questioning, are necessary to keep our heads in war.

“Fear makes good traitors. And anyone in the school who become so afraid as to curse another student on purpose, hurt someone else over politics, or try and give up Hogwarts to Voldemort and his servants in return for personal safety is a traitor.”

Minerva cocked her head, feeling the weight of all those stares on her. But she would not become bowed by that weight, as Albus had. She would make sure that her choices were made with eyes open.

“I will not ask you not to be afraid,” she said. “I will ask you to come to us if you fear, and talk to your fellow students instead of using your wands on them. We would always rather hear of terror now than suffer the consequences of it later. We are at war, and ripping ourselves apart from the inside, no matter how good the apparent cause, solves nothing.”

There. That speech should tell them that she wouldn’t tolerate attacks on Harry for “causing” the war, or the agitations between Light and Dark families being fought out inside the school, or those students afraid of werewolves attacking those sympathetic to them.

Harry might still hold his strength back. I will not. My school will not become a battleground.

Hermione lingered at the Gryffindor table even when Ron glanced at her a time or two, obviously expecting her help with leading the first-years up to the Tower. Hermione waited until she saw Zacharias approaching her, and then made a shooing gesture at Ron. He frowned, but turned to the first-years—especially the small boy who had begun to cry when the Hat shouted his House name—and began explaining the route.

Zacharias was almost to her now. Hermione could make out the thunderous frown on his face. She braced herself. She had expected something intense to happen when Zacharias refused to discuss GUTOEKOM in his letters to her, and simply ignored her when she did try to broach the subject. From his expression, it was not going to be anything good.

What he didn't seem to realize was that he couldn't intimidate her.

Zacharias halted, and kept frowning. The badger scar high on his cheek, which he had received when he summoned Helga Hufflepuff's spirit into his body during the Battle of Hogwarts, made him look stronger and more serious than Hermione remembered, as if it diminished the lines sarcasm had carved on his face. He had also grown during the summer, and stood taller than she did. Hermione didn't care. She waited.

She had acquired a copy of the entire book about the Grand Unified Theory before she came back to Hogwarts, and devoured it in three fascinated days. If it was true—and no one had yet managed to prove it wrong—then it meant she belonged in the wizarding world just as much as any pureblood who might despise her for being born of Muggle parents. She didn't have to keep her eyes on the ground and apologize any more for not having the right “blood,” or even have her only source of satisfaction be that she could learn the dances well and thus trick other wizards into thinking she did have the right blood.

“Magic chose me to wield it, she thought, heart beating hard with wonder. Who are they to dispute that choice?”

“You know what I feel about the Grand Unified Theory, I think,” Zacharias said, in that pompous manner he had.

“You think it's a load of bollocks,” said Hermione.

Zacharias blinked, then gave a short nod of acceptance. “I do. And I just want to make it clear that I haven't changed my mind about marrying you as soon as we leave school, Hermione.” She fought to keep from gritting her teeth at the smug assurance in his voice that that would happen. He hasn't changed so much after all. “There's some anti-Muggleborn sentiment running high even in my family right now, but it'll pass. Just don't insist that it's true to my mother, and—”

“Why shouldn't I insist it's true?” Hermione asked, not loudly. Her voice was still keen enough to make him shut up, even to surprise a gape out of him. She went on. “I've read the research, Zacharias. It's

brilliant. And it makes so much more sense than trying to say that purebloods always breed true—except when they suddenly have Squib children, or when magic suddenly shows up in a family that's never had magic before. They had statistics, Zacharias. The number of times that Muggleborn witches and wizards turn out to have Squib ancestors in the last five generations is just above zero. And did you know that the births of Muggleborns increased during those years when the purebloods almost interbred themselves out of existence? Magic was going to return to the world somehow, even if it wasn't in the families who thought they should always have it."

Hermione was aware that her voice had risen. She didn't care. What Thomas Rhangnara and the others had done was brilliant, and she hadn't seen any defense against it so far that didn't consist of covering one's ears and bawling.

Including, it seemed, Zacharias's. He was puffed up like a cat about to attack. He snorted. "That's not true," he said.

"Yes, it is," said Hermione, and took a step towards him. "Have you read the report?"

"Of course not. It's—"

"A load of bollocks, yes, I know," said Hermione. "I know you think that. I was just trying to determine whether that came from direct experience, or the load of bollocks that determines one can know the contents of a book without having read it."

Zacharias's face was such a deep red that Hermione might have been tempted to fear for his health, except that she knew he didn't have any heart problems; he'd told her so himself last year, when bragging about the physical and magical health of his family. He'd wanted her to know so that she didn't have to worry about her children carrying any taint, he'd said.

Except the taint of having a Muggleborn mother, apparently, Hermione thought, as she watched Zacharias try to wriggle out of it.

“It’s more complicated than purebloods never having problems, of course it is,” he said, voice obviously on the verge of snapping like rotten ice. “But that doesn’t mean the research is true, Hermione. If it were, it would mean that the old families really aren’t anything special—“

Hermione smiled.

It was all she had to do. Zacharias jerked as if stung, and said, “You can’t think that. Not with everything I told you about the Smith family, everything my ancestors have done.”

“I wasn’t impressed with your blood,” said Hermione. “Never with that. I was impressed because you were intelligent, and because you rode into battle and gave yourself over to Helga’s spirit without knowing if you would come back, and because you told me that you loved me and thought I was intelligent.” She lifted her chin. “I never cared about who your parents were, Zacharias, and I thought you didn’t care that much about mine. I was wrong, wasn’t I?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Zacharias said.

“I can see that,” said Hermione. “That’s the great thing, don’t you see?” She had to fight the impulse to extend a hand to him. One couldn’t compromise when arguing with Zacharias, or he would mistake it for capitulation. “That magic doesn’t just follow bloodline, that it means so many different things and chooses so many different people to wield it. That’s so much more interesting and marvelous than just trotting along with blood. It’s brilliant.”

Zacharias shook his head, lips pursed and nostrils flaring, and turned away from her.

Hermione became aware, then, of how many people were watching them. She lifted her head, though she flushed when she saw Hannah Abbott’s eyes shining, and Colin Creevey looking at her the way he usually only looked at Harry or Connor. It was the first time she could remember that people had admired her for something other than her marks or how much she could help them with their homework.

And it will go on that way, she thought. I have no plans to abandon what I think any time soon. Especially if Zacharias continues to insist on the research not being true without ever having read it.

Draco supposed he should have helped the other Slytherins Prefects take the first-years down to the dungeons, but there were plenty of them who could do that, and it wasn't as though the dungeons were very far away from the Great Hall. He would much rather accompany Harry to the meeting with McGonagall he had after dinner, and when he mentioned that, Harry nodded without hesitation.

"As long as the Headmistress doesn't object," he said.

"I can't imagine why she would," Draco murmured, eyes on Harry as they stood and walked towards the gargoyle again. Perhaps they would make it without being stopped by Harry's prat of a brother this time. Draco would prefer that.

He had thought about what his vengeance on Potter should be while eating dinner—well, while he and the other Slytherins ate dinner, and Harry ate from a case of food he'd brought along with him from Copley-by-the-Sea. (Harry was really taking this determination not to live on any house elf labor too far). McGonagall talking about what she would do to students cursing other students meant hexing was out, even before Harry had reminded him that there were more Slytherin ways to take vengeance. And Draco had to admit, his experience with Potter that morning had reminded him how enjoyable it could be to hand his victims just enough rope to hang themselves with.

He now thought he could get to Harry's brother by flaunting how close he was to Harry, and slowly taunting Potter into rages. Much the same tactic the git had used on him, actually, but with Draco in control this time.

It would have to be a careful plan, because Harry would hate it if he found out, and there was the strong chance Potter would tell Harry if he figured it out. But it couldn't be too subtle, or a Gryffindor wouldn't notice in the first place. Draco found himself getting more interested in the challenge the more consideration he gave it. It would occupy

him whenever he wasn't bedding Harry, studying for classes, working his contacts in the Ministry, or trying to figure out who had wanted to kill him.

Draco frowned slightly as Harry caught the Headmistress just outside her office and spoke to her in a conversation he didn't need to hear, since it included unnecessary apologies for the inconvenience to her. Did he really believe Shield of the Granian had come after him because of his possession gift?

No, he thought. The Unspeakables likely wouldn't have let me leave the Ministry that day if they'd sensed me in their minds. I still think they were doing it to hurt or cripple Harry somehow. Merlin knows he goes a bit mad if he thinks I'm in danger.

"Mr. Malfoy, follow along, please."

With a start, Draco looked up and realized that he'd missed McGonagall speaking to the gargoyle and opening the moving staircase. With a short nod, he stepped onto it after her and Harry, and heard the gargoyle grind shut behind them.

"In truth, Harry, I was concerned about your safety at Hogwarts even before you reported this attack," McGonagall said.

Only last year, Draco thought, Harry would have done something idiotic like insist that Shield of the Granian had been after Draco, and not him. Instead, he just nodded in resignation. Perhaps he's remembering that he actually did get hurt in the attack, Draco thought. Watching Harry shrink and lose his magical strength had been bloody terrifying.

Watching his left hand appear and then disappear again had been—painful. Draco shook his head to get rid of such thoughts and focused on the conversation in front of him.

"I don't see what else can be done about it though, Madam," Harry said, pushing his glasses up his nose. "We have the wards. We have my magic. We have Owen and Michael, who've sworn to me. We have Peter, and Mrs. Bulstrode, and Draco." He smiled at Draco, who

smiled back. "But if my enemies plan enough, then all of those advantages can be bypassed."

They reached the office, and McGonagall walked in ahead of them, sitting down behind her desk with a nod. "I know that, Harry. But there are a few options I wished to ask you about. For one thing, Mrs. Gloryflower has contacted me. She wishes to present Hogwarts itself with a gift of artificial animals, watching over the students. They would help anyone in danger, but, of course, they would be focused on you in particular."

"What kind of animals?" Harry asked, as he and Draco took chairs in front of McGonagall's desk.

McGonagall reached behind herself. Draco was impressed to note that the office looked different than it had last year, when McGonagall had still had the odd artifact from Dumbledore's days about, and plenty of his paperwork. Now she had emptied the office of the artifacts and lined the walls with neat bookcases instead. The Sorting Hat went to the highest shelf, in a place of honor. A richly-decorated sword Draco remembered seeing clutched in a phoenix's talons in the Chamber of Secrets hung in a glass case on the wall behind her. The perch that phoenix, Fawkes, had once graced stood in a corner, in silent memorial to the bird who had died at Midwinter. Draco restrained himself from peering under the desk to see if there was a cat basket and balls of yarn there. All in all, it was a room that his mother might well have called elegant.

"Butterflies," said McGonagall now, turning around and holding her palm out.

Harry laughed in delight. Draco snapped his attention back, and saw that the butterfly in question was silver, ornamented with delicate blue-green tourmalines along its wings. It rose into the air with a quiver, and then darted up in front of Harry, hovering there.

"They would roam about the school," McGonagall said, "watching, and able to alert any professor at once if there was danger. Mrs. Gloryflower also said that they could harm those who might attempt to harm another, if no help can come in time." She took the butterfly

back and touched its wings. When she held it up again, Draco could see thin, sharp blades springing out from beneath the tourmalines. He blinked, then did another once-over of the butterfly sitting in McGonagall's palm. Light families can create some dangerous creatures when they want to, I suppose.

"And they can't be fooled into attacking an innocent person?" Harry asked.

McGonagall shook her head. "Nor is that all," she said. "Mrs. Gloryflower said that you had written her at one point before the Midsummer battle, and asked if she had any ideas for making you appear more Light and less Dark in the eyes of your Light allies."

Harry exhaled, and nodded. "Yes. What did she decide on?"

"She has a young cousin who has been tutored out of Hogwarts to become a war witch," said McGonagall carefully. "I have agreed to let the girl transfer here. She would be a sixth-year, as you are. Her name is Syrinx. Mrs. Gloryflower asks whether you would be willing to accept her as a sworn companion, as the Rosier-Henlin twins are."

Draco scowled. He had almost forgotten about the twins, even with Harry talking about them. He disliked the idea that they would be around Harry most of the time, and that now a stranger would be joining them. At least the twins were a year older than he and Harry were, and Syrinx was a girl, so they couldn't share the same room with them.

Draco smiled. He had plans for that room empty of everyone but Harry and himself, given that Vince, Greg, and Blaise had all vanished as the years passed.

"Of course, if she was willing." Harry's voice was resigned, but not actually resentful. "What else, Madam?"

"I give you a certain amount of leeway," McGonagall said. Draco looked at her, and realized her eyes were half-lidded, so that she looked more like a cat watching a mousehole than she usually did. "For example, allowing your allies to meet on school grounds, and

permission to attend the alliance meeting that you organized in the spring, though it meant missing several days of classes.”

Harry nodded. “I know, Madam.”

“I will continue to grant you that leeway,” said McGonagall. “As long as you remember that you are also a student, Harry, and subject to the rules of Hogwarts, particularly the ones I detailed at the Sorting Feast. Do well in your classes. Defend yourself as you must, but I would prefer that you curse no one, and do not attack.”

Draco opened his mouth to protest. What would happen if the student in question was a legitimate threat to Harry, as several of the Ravenclaws had been last year, and twisted what had happened around to make it look as though Harry had attacked them?

Harry’s face, though, registered actual admiration, and respect. “Thank you, Madam,” he said, bowing his head. “It’s good that Hogwarts has a Headmistress who cares more about the safety of her charges than her image, as Dumbledore did. Don’t worry. I won’t have trouble restraining myself.”

McGonagall nodded, a sharp gleam entering her eyes. Draco wondered if she had already known that Harry was extremely unlikely ever to need the warning, and had used this as a test of sorts.

He must have made some discontented little noise, because abruptly the Headmistress was looking at him. Draco strove to put his chin up, despite his discomfort. He was just as glad that he wouldn’t have to have this woman for his NEWT Transfiguration class.

“Mr. Malfoy,” said McGonagall coolly. “I am still not entirely sure how far I can trust you, but circumstances being what they are, you are also in a position to cause more trouble than the average student. I expect you to abide by the rules of conduct I spoke of at the Sorting Feast, as well.”

Draco inclined his head stiffly. “Of course, Headmistress,” he said. I’m hardly going to let you catch me, you old cat.

McGonagall went on staring at him long enough to make him wonder if she had been a Legilimens all along, and then nodded. "Good." She looked back at Harry once more. "I think you may go to the dungeons now, Harry."

"Thank you, Madam," said Harry, and stood. "I'll speak to Mrs. Gloryflower myself and thank her for the butterflies and Syrinx's presence. I'm glad you've agreed to them."

Draco kept his face smooth as they left the office. He wondered if Harry would say something to him about the attack, or the talk with McGonagall, or even her parting words to him, but Harry said, apparently out of the air, "Are you all right, Draco?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Draco frowned. Did I show something on my face? I didn't mean to.

Harry turned to face him on the moving staircase, holding his arm and staring into his eyes. "Because you looked upset when McGonagall mentioned Syrinx Gloryflower. I wanted to make sure you'd agreed to her presence."

Draco felt a smile tugging at his lips. He couldn't feel bad about Harry noticing that, even though it did confirm that he needed to keep his face more controlled. He leaned nearer Harry and kissed him. Harry accepted it, languidly moving his hand from Draco's arm to the nape of his neck, but pulled back a few moments later and gave him a serious look.

"I'll survive," Draco said. "And if you treat her with cool consideration, and no more than that, I'll have no reason to get jealous."

Harry smiled. "There's no chance it would be more than friendship, in any case," he said. "Why should it be, when I already have the one person I really want?" He kissed Draco again.

Draco let thoughts of vengeance go for right now. "About our bedroom," he began.

“What about—“ And then Harry caught on, and his eyes widened. “We could Transfigure the beds, if we wanted,” he breathed. “No one else will be in there.”

“Exactly,” said Draco. “I have a lot of plans for that privacy. And a brand new book on locking charms, in case anyone interrupts us.”

Harry seemed to be trying to be serious, but his grin was fighting its way out. “We can use the privacy to study, can’t we?” he asked. “Or to discuss battle strategies no one else can overhear. Or—“

“Wanker,” Draco muttered, and kissed him again, glad that, by the time they returned to the dungeons, the first-years should have been herded into their bedrooms, and determined that not even Millicent wanting to talk to them would keep him and Harry from their bedroom for long.

Connor punched his pillow.

Then he decided that wasn’t enough, so he pulled his wand out, aimed it at his pillow, and shouted, “Concutio!”

The pillow blasted apart in a mass of cloth and feathers. Connor stood panting and glaring as they drifted down onto his bed, now and then shaking his head so that his fringe would get out of his eyes.

Why would Harry think I was trying to just bait Malfoy into cursing me? his thoughts said, for the thousandth time. I could have defended myself, and I would have.

You didn’t let him know that, his thoughts pointed out, also for the thousandth time. You didn’t deny what he accused you of.

“I shouldn’t have to,” Connor muttered, flopping down onto his bed and making the feathers rise and flurry around him. “Why? It was just insults, and it’s Malfoy’s fault that he reacted so badly. And Harry took my side when that article about the theory came out. Malfoy’s just a wanker.”

“No arguments there, mate.”

Connor rolled over and watched as Ron approached his own bed, stretching his arms over his head and yawning. "He is," he told Ron earnestly. "He gets me in arguments with my own brother."

Ron gave him a quick, curious glance, started to open his mouth, then shut it and shook his head.

"What?" Connor demanded.

Ron watched him for a long moment. Connor scowled. He always hated it when Ron did that. It was the same look he gave chessboards, right before he moved his piece and won. Always won, in fact. Connor had never managed to beat Ron in a chess match, and didn't know anyone who had.

"Well, it's like this," said Ron at last. "Brothers fight. All the time. We fought with Percy, Ginny and the twins and me, when we found out that he wasn't going to take the Ministry job our dad got for him. And I fought with the twins for pranking me. And Bill and Charlie fought something awful the first year Charlie was at Hogwarts, to hear Mum tell it, because Bill didn't like having someone there with the same last name as him. And then there was the time Fred sneezed in Dad's food, and Charlie got blamed for it, and then Charlie came outside and found Fred, and—"

"What's your point?" Connor demanded, knowing he sounded sulky, and not caring.

Ron shrugged. "We made up again," he said. "We usually didn't want to, and sometimes it took months, but we always made up again. But we did it by either explaining everything—Ginny picked that up from Mum, too, she's an absolute terror for it—or just agreeing to forget about it. And you and Harry don't forget it, and you aren't talking to him about Malfoy being a wanker. And he doesn't talk to you about this prank, either, you said, but that doesn't mean it didn't hurt him. He probably assumes you would have told him if you had a serious problem with his boyfriend." Ron grimaced as if he'd bitten into a sour apple. "So talk to him, Connor. If you don't, then he'll just go around thinking you don't feel guilty, and that'll drive the fight deeper, and

you'll get upset at him for not realizing you're upset and keep silent, and things will get worse and worse."

He paused, a long moment, chewing his lip. Connor waited.

"And the thing is, mate?" Ron tilted his head and studied him for a moment. "You are being a git about this. Just a little. Even though Malfoy's a wanker and doesn't deserve him, he's Harry's boyfriend, and arguing with him hurts Harry. It's like if Harry argued with Parvati all the time. You'll have to make peace sooner or later. "

Connor's mouth fell open. He tried to say, "Ron—"

Ron began digging through his trunk, and ignored him.

Connor fell back on what used to be his pillow and stared at the ceiling again, thinking fiercely. Could that really be true? He'd assumed that Harry knew which behavior of Malfoy's was ridiculous and agreed to things like the prank because he agreed that Malfoy's head needed to have the air taken out of it. He hadn't considered it in the light of Harry trying to balance his brother and his boyfriend.

Not just his boyfriend. His partner. And that means that Malfoy's probably not going to go away.

Connor shuddered and wrapped his arms around himself. Then he stood up, shook his head, and walked to the door of the bedroom. He didn't want to think about this right now.

He would go and find Parvati. She always made him feel better.

He could feel Ron's eyes on his back, but he ignored that. Ron could be wrong, too, just like Harry.

Chapter Twenty: The Earth Will Shake

Falco brushed dirt from his hands, and grimaced. As much magic as he possessed, as much useless time as he could avoid by bending it, the fact remained that some things could not be done save with manual labor. It was only a shame that this manual labor forced dirt under his fingernails and ground it into the creases of his palms.

He looked up sharply as a shadow passed overhead, then relaxed. It was only an owl, hunting prey. And why shouldn't it be? Evening was coming on.

Falco climbed carefully over the remains of a stone wall and slithered down a slight slope, then paused to look back. The moonlight gleamed faintly off—he could not call them ruins, not exactly. He would rather call them the remains of a house. It could be built up again, but for now, that would be counterproductive. Better to leave them exactly as they were, so that no one would suspect anything was wrong. Tampering with stones in a place where no one had a reason to come could attract the attention that Falco didn't want.

He was satisfied, for now. He had used a tactic of the Light, honesty, in approaching Harry and telling him what would happen if he didn't Declare. Now he had completed his use of a Dark tactic, done in subterfuge, to insure that Voldemort had a place to retreat to that would protect him from Harry's notice and Harry's magic. Falco was not entirely sure that the Dark Lord would trust him yet, or the promptings that Falco had tucked into his mind. But that was all right. For now, his current hiding place was certainly safe. Falco had prepared this one against his current hiding place being found out, which would happen sooner or later.

Now he would begin a tactic that was a mixture of Dark and Light, to keep the balance. He would let Harry know who was doing this to him, fulfilling honesty, but he would not let him know the purpose, fulfilling subterfuge. And the magic itself was as neutral as any magic could be, blending truth and deception together until the maker could not tell them apart.

Falco closed his eyes and separated his mind. On the surface of it, the sentry shard of consciousness floated, ready to alert him if anyone approached. Beneath the surface, his mind twisted and dived into the paths of Dark and Light.

The world ripped apart around him. He saw trails of dirt racing away, and black highways that climbed to the stars. He saw golden glowing steps that sang of Midsummer, and paved roads of white stone running in the brilliant light of noon. He touched the secrets of Dark and Light and felt them singing to him, trying to tempt him into Declaration.

Falco sighed. It may yet come to that, if I am to save the world. Depending on how slowly or quickly the Dark Lord recovered from his wound, it might yet come to that, yes. But Falco would do nothing hastily. He would study the situation, as he always did, and make sure that he didn't act out of temper. That was the problem with Harry, with Albus, with Tom—they all acted out of temper, and let their emotions control them. Falco had forsaken the need for such things long ago.

He walked along a black highway for a few paces, then leaped onto a golden staircase, and then down into a quiet place that streamed with gray mist. There, he lifted his hands and brought them together.

And a dream grew out between them. Dreams were said to be foretellings, visions of the truth to come, but they hid themselves in symbols and bedazzled the ones who dreamed them. Balanced magic, Falco thought. Neutral magic. He only wished there was more like this in the world.

He let the dream spiral up between his fingers, gathering strength and speed as he fed it power, and then hover in front of him. It looked like gray smoke aswarm with images, but most magic looked like gray smoke here.

Falco smiled, and breathed.

The dream turned and flew away, seeking Harry. Falco himself reunited the rest of his mind with the shard of consciousness that

floated on the surface and grew sea eagle wings, springing for the sky. It was time for him to be on his way to his next effort to keep the balance.

Harry settled back in his chair and waited. He and Draco were both in NEWT Transfiguration, and this was the first chance he would have to see Henrietta teach—though he had heard only good things about her so far. Draco settled into the seat behind him, muttering and examining something. Harry turned his head, and frowned when he realized they were notes from the Animagus lesson they'd had with Peter last night.

"I don't think she'll let you study them in here," he whispered.

"She won't notice," Draco whispered back.

Harry glanced around the classroom, and raised his eyebrows. There weren't that many people in here. Hermione had qualified, of course, and so had Lavender Brown, Dean Thomas, and Seamus Finnigan. Harry recognized a few Ravenclaw girls from their year, but they understandably didn't try to catch Harry's eye. Zacharias sat in one corner, alternately pretending to read and scowling at Hermione's back. Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan sat next to each other, but didn't say anything; Harry thought that must have to do with the Grand Unified Theory, since Hannah was Muggleborn and Ernie pureblood. Millicent had managed to qualify, but hadn't arrived for the class yet; Harry wondered if she'd overslept.

"I think Henrietta is going to notice," he told Draco.

Draco sighed and slid the notes back inside his book just as the door opened and Millicent arrived, panting. Henrietta was right behind her. Harry studied her face, then shook his head slightly. The glamour was perfect. Henrietta looked happy and approachable in ways she never had as herself, and even her walk seemed different, as if she'd Transfigured one leg to be slightly longer than the other.

Millicent sank into a seat behind them. Draco said something Harry couldn't hear, snickering, and Millicent responded with a snarled insult.

Then Henrietta stepped up to the front of the room and claimed all their attention. It was hard not to look at her, Harry found. He wondered if she had used a subtle spell, or if this was just the effect she usually had when she wasn't sitting in the middle of an alliance meeting and wanted to make herself look as if she were an obedient follower.

"My name is Hilda Belluspersona," said Henrietta. "You will, of course, call me Professor Belluspersona. You will also be on time for class." She didn't glance at Millicent, but she didn't need to, Harry thought; plenty of other people were doing it for her. "I understand that, last year, your Transfiguration education may not have given you all you need to know. This time, it will. I believe in demonstrations. I will Transfigure people in this class, and challenge them to change themselves or others back. I will change you back if no one can manage it by the end of the class, but that means ten points from the Houses of both the Transfigured student and the ones who tried and failed."

Harry blinked. Well, yes, that is rather different from the way McGonagall taught.

"We will begin with a revision of some basic concepts," said Henrietta. "I find myself doubting that you learned what you needed to know last year." She arched an eyebrow, and then turned and waved her wand at the board. Harry blinked again as it Transfigured into a gigantic scroll, with great golden lettering that everyone across the room could easily read. Hermione's quill scrabbled and scratched furiously as she scribbled the notes down.

"First," said Henrietta, "Transfiguration is the art of envisioning. You must know how many limbs a turtle has, and that it has a head, when you attempt to transform a teapot into one, but more than that, you should know the very pattern of the shell. You should know the gleam in its eye. You should be able to see how its toes splay, and the way it walks." She turned around and gave them all another severe look. "I suspect this was not taught to you last year, either, so we will be having lessons in learning how to see."

“Second, Transfiguration is the art of knowing limitations. Attempting to change a small creature into a large one will only exhaust you, and leave the creature in a half-transformed state. The Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes in the Ministry has a sub-committee devoted only to undoing botched Transfigurations. They are constantly busy. I will not have it said that any student who passed through my class made more work for them. Do you understand me?”

Harry found himself nodding along with all the rest. She's even sterner than McGonagall, but she does make her point. He couldn't remember if he'd known what Henrietta was saying before. Perhaps she simply explained it more clearly than McGonagall did, or the rotating team of other professors, McGonagall, and NEWT students who had taught Transfiguration last year.

“Third, Transfiguration is the art of common sense. It may be useful to turn the ground into ice beneath your enemies in battle—but, on the other hand, if you rush onto the ice without remembering to change your shoes into skates, you will have problems. Combined with the first two lessons, Transfiguration can be wielded as weapon, as tool, and as art. Otherwise, it will fail you, but the failure lies in yourself and not your wand.” Henrietta's eyes glittered intensely, making her look the most like herself of anything Harry had seen so far.

Harry wrote the pointers frantically onto his parchment. I'm glad Edith did decide to go to France with a tutor after all. She would be terrified if she were here.

“There is one more note that I feel compelled to give you,” Henrietta said, drawing her wand. “I know that some students are interested in becoming Animagi. If you intend to do so, you will study in private under myself, Headmistress McGonagall, or an approved and registered Animagus. This class will not include instructions on achieving a private animal form.”

Harry looked around enough to surprise a look of disappointment on Hermione's face, but all the others seemed to have expected it. Draco just looked smug, anyway, despite the failure of his

expectations that Henrietta wouldn't mind them studying their notes from Peter in her class.

"Now, we will begin with a small demonstration." Henrietta nodded to Harry. "If you will come here, Harry. I shall Transfigure your hand to wood, and let the others try to change it back."

Harry nodded and stood up, grateful beyond words that Henrietta didn't intend to favor him above the other students just because they were in an alliance together.

Peter smoothed his robes down and wondered if he could confide his intense nervousness to anyone. Minerva, perhaps, but she was so busy that she didn't have time for a private talk right now. And she had had faith in his teaching abilities when she hired him, so she would only tell him that of course he would be a good Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, insist he stand up and go teach, and then shove him out her office door as she turned her attention to something else.

He could probably talk to Harry, but since he had Harry in his first Defense class in the next few minutes, that struck him as a bit of an unfair tactic.

He told himself to move away from the mirror, that no one would notice a few creases of worry on his face amid the lines that age and worry had already put there, and then found the perfect excuse as someone knocked on the door. Peter felt his breathing ease as he approached it, grabbing the list of names and his textbook on the way. Someone had probably come to him with a problem, and now that he was out of the Sanctuary, he found it easier to help other people than to think constantly about his own fears. They ran in circles, anyway. Peter had to break the circle before he could do anything productive with them.

He opened the door, and blinked. Connor stood there, staring anxiously up at him. Connor's name was also on the list in his hand, and Peter would have expected him to be already hurrying to the classroom.

“Connor?” he asked.

Connor swallowed and nodded. “I know Defense is about to start,” he said. “I—can I speak to you on the way? It’s about something important that I know I can’t discuss with Harry yet.”

“Of course.” Peter locked the door to his quarters behind him with a nonverbal spell, and then began walking up the corridor. Connor struggled to keep up. He was in that awkward stage of growth where his torso seemed to have finished but his legs hadn’t quite settled yet, Peter thought.

Connor still wasted almost a quarter of the journey—Peter had timed the distance between the Defense classroom and his own quarters very precisely yesterday—worrying his lip between his teeth. At last, though, he said, “I had an argument with Harry over Malfoy yesterday.”

Peter simply nodded. That much had been obvious to anyone who watched the boys’ faces in the Great Hall last night. “What was the argument about?”

“Malfoy came into my room and started insulting me about how loudly I was packing,” Connor said. “I, um, I said some things that were probably really insulting, about how I would have thought he would get used to the way halfbloods packed, seeing as he was already sharing the house and a bed with one. I told him to stop being a hypocrite, and that everyone else could see the way he crowed about pureblood superiority was a sham, since Harry is his boyfriend. Harry came in and got angry at me, and told me that I had to apologize to Malfoy, not him. I didn’t want to, though, and so I didn’t say anything. Why should I offer a fake apology?” Connor now scowled, and had left off chewing his lower lip entirely. His mulish expression reminded Peter forcibly of James, and the way he would look when he was sixteen and having a fight with Sirius. Sirius was much more likely to laugh it off, though, or play a prank on James and use that to get him to laugh. James did this kind of thing. “I think apologizing should wait until I really mean it.”

“That’s true,” said Peter solemnly. They were almost at the classroom now, but he saw students still pouring into it, so he felt comfortable taking Connor and urging him gently to the side. He told himself it was not because his vision had blurred and his stomach felt shaky. It was only coincidence that this would delay his getting into the classroom for a few minutes more. “But you might want to consider the situation more closely, Connor, and whether you can offer a true apology based on other things.”

Connor folded his arms. James in miniature, Peter thought, and gently tucked away the pang that memory brought him. “What other things?”

“Draco did something childish,” said Peter. “But you reacted in a childish fashion. Given that you didn’t start the fight—“

“I didn’t—“

“You might be able to say that you were sorry because of the way you reacted. You’re the more grown one, aren’t you?” Connor nodded fervently, of course. It was Peter’s private opinion that Draco had managed to file off more of his own warts than Connor had, but that the ones left were uglier than Connor’s, and Harry made it worse by indulging his boyfriend. It wouldn’t do to say that to Harry’s brother, however. “So the way you reacted is unworthy of you. You can apologize for that. And you can apologize for letting something so silly as an insult about your packing rattle your composure at all. Those are both things to feel sincerely sorry for.”

“But,” said Connor, and stopped.

Peter waited, careful to show no signs of impatience, though the time when he should begin the Defense class was getting close. He had mastered this art in his seventh year, when he had managed his own slow, painful transformation from fawning sycophant to his friends to someone stronger and better. Neither Sirius nor James had been the kind of person who responded well to the slightest sign of disinterest.

“But,” Connor said, every word dragged out of him as if on a fishhook, “Parvati said that it was Harry’s fault. That he should have made sure

we reconciled right then and there, instead of leaving the issue to fester between us.”

Peter smiled. “And what would you have felt if Harry had urged you to reconcile right then and there?”

Connor ducked his head, in that way James had when he didn’t want to admit he was wrong. His fringe fell over his heart-shaped scar, and he looked like any ordinary teenage boy, angry and sullen.

“Connor?” Peter prompted after a moment.

“Pushed,” Connor told the floor.

Peter nodded. “Exactly. Harry might have asked you how you felt, but if you tell him nothing, then I think he’s right in assuming that you have nothing to say to him yet. It’s rather like the situation with Severus—“

Connor looked up with wide, horrified hazel eyes. “I am nothing like Snape.”

Peter ignored him, because that wasn’t the point right now. “Who is upset with whatever Camellia said to him, but won’t tell Harry why. Nor will he tell Harry about his dreams. He wants the perfect understanding that can only come when Harry knows all the nuances and details of the situation, but to have that perfect understanding, he would need to give the words away. He doesn’t want to.” He nodded at Connor, whose face had folded up into another scowl. “That sounds to me like what you’re doing. You have a perspective on the situation that Harry doesn’t. But for him to know what that perspective is, you need to talk to him. Otherwise, he has only your actions to judge by.”

Connor muttered something that sounded uncomplimentary, though Peter couldn’t tell whether it was aimed at him, or Harry, or Draco, or even Snape, and then ducked into the Defense classroom. Peter shook his head and focused on the task at hand, but part of his mind remained on Connor’s predicament even as he strode to the front of the room, dwelling there with both amusement and sympathy.

Why would anyone think that someone else could understand their mind perfectly if they don't speak that mind?

He placed the textbook on the desk, smiled at his students, and found that most of his nervousness had blown away like mist. That always happened. Focusing on someone else's problems was a good thing, though Harry hadn't yet learned the balance he needed to when doing it.

"Welcome to NEWT Defense Against the Dark Arts," he began. "My name is Professor Pettigrew..."

"Because she just arrived at the school today," said Harry, pushing open the door to the abandoned classroom where McGonagall had told him that Syrinx was waiting to meet him. He hesitated a moment, considering whether he could add what he wanted to say next, and then decided to, because if he couldn't joke with Draco, who could he joke with? "Obviously."

"She should have arrived at the start of term like everyone else," said Draco, and didn't seem to notice the whine his tone was taking on. "Why wouldn't she have?"

"Why don't we ask her that?" Harry said, and stepped into the classroom.

The girl sitting on a chair and looking out the window turned to face him. Harry scrutinized her carefully. He would have known at once that she was a Gloryflower, he thought; he had never seen hair that golden and curly on anyone who wasn't Laura or her niece Delilah, one of three children of prominent Light families Fenrir Greyback had bitten. Her eyes were green, however, not the yellow typical of pureblood Light families. She also had only a few bells in her hair, while both Delilah and Augustus Starrise, trained as war witches or wizards, had worn far more. Harry supposed it was because she hadn't yet completed her training.

She rose to her feet and bowed. Harry took in the efficient movement, the way her eyes regarded them without challenge or surprise, the

lack of emotion on her face, and felt a tension he barely noticed most of the time relax. She's like me, or Doncan. Trained as a guardian. Capable of putting aside personal emotion and doing what needs to be done.

"Hello," he said. "You're Syrinx Gloryflower?"

"I am, sir." Syrinx examined him right back. Harry wondered what exactly she was seeing. "Come to swear to you."

Harry glanced back at the classroom door. Draco stood there, staring at Syrinx as if he were trying to cope with the sudden and unexpected change from—whatever he had been expecting. Behind him were Michael and Owen. Both had their arms held out so that the lightning-shaped scars on them were prominent. Harry winced and looked back at Syrinx.

"You understand the constraints of doing so?" he said softly. "That you must swear oaths to me, but that you can't simply attack anyone who threatens me? That this is a test of judgment and rationality?"

"Of course I do, sir," said Syrinx, a faint frown crossing her forehead. "That is part of the reason I wished to come and serve you. A trained war witch would never react out of emotions as irrationally and hastily as a Death Eater, but I am not yet fully trained, and I need more testing."

"Forgive me," Harry said, "but the only war wizard I knew well was Augustus Starrise, and he did not impress me as a paragon of rationality."

Syrinx's face cleared. "He would not, sir," she said. "His anchor broke."

"Anchor?" Harry didn't know that much about what war witches and wizards trained to do, but it sounded as though it were more involved than he had imagined.

Syrinx nodded. "Many war witches choose an anchor, sir, unless they're truly able to go through life alone. That person becomes an

image in their minds, a reminder of their duty, their restraint in moments when they might lose their temper. Augustus Starrise's anchor was his sister. When she died, then his rationality broke, and he used his training for purposes it should not be used for.

"I don't know yet if you would make a good anchor for me, sir, because I do not know if you are likely to survive the war. But I wanted to swear to you. I wish to help defend you. As my training continues, I may come to see more in you than I see at present. And if the war finishes and you are still alive, then I will approach you and ask you to do me the honor of becoming my anchor. From the tales my cousin Laura tells of you, you are already someone I can admire." She drew a knife smoothly from a pocket of her robe, where it had rested without Harry noticing it, and laid it along her left arm, watching him all the while.

Harry relaxed some more. He appreciated how honest she was, and her reasoning made perfect sense to him. Syrinx was a solider. That much would have been clear even if she didn't call him "sir" all the time.

He understood people like this. He had been one until a short time ago, and in his better moments, when he could plan and think instead of simply acting on his feelings, he still often was. He almost envied Syrinx her duty, that everyone accepted her commitment to her path and wouldn't try to talk her out of following it. If things had been different...if no one had found me out...

But things had changed, they had found out, and Harry had long since reconciled himself to the consequences. He watched as Syrinx cut her left arm, and listened to her words, her voice clear and strong, her eyes fixed on him and never wavering. He didn't think he'd seen her blink yet. He wondered if part of her training as a war witch included imitating cats.

"I pledge my loyalty to you," she said, "as the Sunrise Guard did, as the Horns of the Morning did, as the Bringers of Hope did." Harry supposed it was only reasonable that she would choose the names of companions of Light Lords and Ladies, rather than Dark ones, as Owen and Michael had. "As guard, as courtier, as courier, as running

hound, as whatever you need me to be, then I am yours, for the honor of serving someone so honorable.”

“The pledge is accepted, and to you I return guarantees of protection, loyalty, and constancy. While I live, you shall never lack for a guardian, a champion, or a friend.” Harry gave the oath with more confidence than he had when he delivered it to Owen and Michael. Then, of course, he had not expected such a swearing, and he had wondered why anyone would want to accompany him in the first place. Now he was used to it. Besides, he understood Syrinx’s reasons better than most. If it was part of her path, then of course she would do it.

“An honor to be beside you, sir,” said Syrinx, smiling for the first time. Harry had the feeling that it wasn’t something she did often. “The oath is true.” She shifted her arm, and the white lightning bolt scar appeared where the cut had been, a moment ago. She slipped the knife back into her pocket, drew her wand, and tapped the cut, murmuring a spell Harry hadn’t heard before. It Vanished the blood.

“Have you been Sorted?” Harry asked her, wondering if he would share a House with her as he did with Owen. Michael was in Ravenclaw, and spent most of his time with that House, so far, when he didn’t join his brother in guarding Harry. Draco hadn’t yet noticed that Michael’s eyes followed him quite a bit of the time. Harry wondered why not.

“I have,” said Syrinx. “The Hat placed me in Hufflepuff. Understandable, of course, as I value hard work and loyalty.” Draco snorted. Syrinx didn’t even look at him. “Did you have a command for me, sir?”

“Only to familiarize yourself with Hogwarts, for now,” said Harry. “I wouldn’t want you to be left behind in your classes, or to get lost if I should need you in a hurry.” Those were words he wouldn’t have, quite, dared to speak to Owen and Michael, but he would have appreciated them when he was still mostly a guardian, and he knew they were the right ones for Syrinx. Her face brightened into another pale, distant smile.

"Yes, sir," she murmured. "I am in sixth year, and have passed my OWLs, but I would not mind more time to know the school." She bowed her head and kept it bowed for a long moment, then turned and strode to the door. Draco made another sound in his throat, but Syrinx didn't look back at him as she vanished.

"She was strange," said Draco flatly.

Harry shrugged. "That must be what someone in the throes of the war training is like, Draco. I know Augustus had violent emotions, but his anchor was broken. Delilah has emotions, but she's passed through the whole thing." He took Draco's hand and squeezed it, wondering why Draco looked so desolate. He had told Draco, and meant it, that there was no way Syrinx could have more of his attention than his partner did, sworn companion or not, and having met her, Harry wouldn't have wished to interfere in her training the way that excessive attention would have done in any case. He liked her and wished her well, and the best way to do that was to let her go about her business in the shadows. "We've met someone in the middle."

Draco grunted for a moment, staring at his feet, and then looked up abruptly at Harry. "I'm going to study my notes on Animagus training," he said. "Are you coming?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I have to talk to the werewolves again." He restrained a sigh. He would have preferred it if the pack had chosen Camellia alpha, or let him appoint her. But they had wanted to keep him, and Harry had accepted the responsibility. He couldn't complain now. At least he had taught them the Rosier-Henlin phoenix song spell, so they didn't have to rely on owls to communicate with him. They did want to talk to him every evening, though.

"Hmm," said Draco, and turned his back. Harry took him gently by the shoulder.

"Are you all right?" he asked. He would not let his bond with Draco become the morass his bonds with Snape and Connor had of late. For both his sake and Draco's, Harry intended to talk about what was bothering them.

"I am," said Draco firmly, and that was that.

"Will you let Michael go with you?" Harry asked quietly. Perhaps it was silly, but he couldn't forget that Shield of the Granian and the Unspeakables had aimed at Draco first.

"If he must," said Draco. Harry saw Michael's eyes light up. He shook his head, and watched as his sworn companion followed his boyfriend away.

"My brother has a crush on your partner, you know," Owen said, when he was obviously sure that both Michael and Draco were out of earshot.

Harry nodded to him. "I know. But Draco hasn't realized it yet."

Owen raised his eyebrows. "And you don't mind?"

Harry tipped his hand back and forth. "It's not that I don't mind, it's that—I don't know, that I trust Draco? I can see him flirting with Michael to make me jealous. I can't see him seriously returning Michael's affections. I'm sorry, he's your brother and wonderfully level-headed, but—"

"It's more than all right," Owen said calmly. "You and Draco have between you a version of what was between our parents."

Harry swallowed, nodding. He still missed Charles Rosier-Henlin. Owen had told Harry about finding his father's charred bones. He had worked a spell that killed himself and two Death Eaters, one of whom was Karkaroff. Owen could only guess why, but said that a threat to his children from Karkaroff would have done it.

"Did I tell you," said Owen, "that our mother is pregnant again?"

Harry laughed, his mood turned around again immediately. "That's wonderful! If you did tell me, I can't remember."

“She is,” said Owen. “She conceived just before the battle, so the child won’t be born until next year, but Michael and I will have a little sibling at last. It was something our parents wanted—badly.”

Harry questioned Owen more about Medusa’s pregnancy as he went back to the Slytherin common room to communicate with the werewolves in relative privacy. It made a wonderful distraction from Connor, from Snape, from the fact that he knew Camellia would plead with him to come back for a visit this weekend, and from the fact that he had so far received only cold refusals from the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts in response to his attempts to help them.

Draco was now aware that Michael Rosier-Henlin was staring at him. They were alone, and Michael wasn’t standing behind his older twin the way he often did.

What Draco hadn’t figured out yet was why. The reflected glory of the Malfoy line? The reflected glory of being Harry’s partner? The fact that Draco was beautiful and confident, and knew both things?

They sat at a table in the library while Draco studied his notes on envisioning one’s Animagus form, something he was still infuriatingly unable to. Most of the tables around them were crowded with students doing homework. Draco sniffed. He’d moved that out of the way already, so he could concentrate on more important matters. You would think that all of them except the first-years would have noticed by now that the professors always give more homework the first week of the year, and adapted accordingly, instead of waiting until Friday afternoon.

Draco yawned and stretched his arms above his head. It gave him the perfect excuse to almost close his eyes, but keep them open just enough to see where Michael’s stare went. Sure enough, it slid up his arms. Draco concealed a smirk. It’s solely the way he evaluates me, then.

He leaned back, and scowled slightly at the notes. Michael immediately leaned forward. “Is there something you need help with?”

Draco tilted his head, letting his hair slip down his cheek. "Well. You see, I'm studying to become an Animagus, but I can't seem to master envisioning the transformation, even though I did well enough at Transfiguration on my OWLs. I wondered if you knew any techniques that might help me. You did attend Durmstrang, after all."

Michel hesitated, then nodded. "There's one thing we learned that might be useful," he said. "Maybe a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher here mentioned it, but we learned it in the regular Dark Arts courses."

Draco moved his tie around as though he were hot, revealing his pulse point, and reveling in the way that Michael couldn't seem to take his eyes off it. "What is it, then?"

"A—meditation, or a cousin of it, so that the Dark Arts don't corrupt your mind," Michael whispered. His dark eyes had gone wide, and he didn't seem to realize how obvious he was being. Draco concealed his amusement and delight. Harry still regarded him too rarely with looks of sheer physical desire; he was more interested in what Draco said and did and thought. "We would separate out what we wanted to see from what was actually there, inside our heads."

"I ought to be able to make use of that," Draco mused. "I've studied my own thoughts enough, to understand my possession gift."

"Possession gift?" Michael's eyes widened further.

Draco nodded. "Yes. A rather wonderful gift, I think, though not one that I can brag about. I can read the thoughts of others, and control their bodies if I want." He drawled that out, watching as the fascination on the other boy's face simultaneously deepened and became mixed with panic. "It was what finally convinced my father to confirm me as magical heir."

Michael blinked. "I—I see."

Draco smirked at him, and then looked back at his notes. "Now, what were you saying about this technique that you learned at Durmstrang?"

He listened carefully as Michael explained. It didn't sound that difficult, though it did involve giving thoughts their own shapes—as animals, as clouds, or as natural formations, mostly—and pushing them gently out of the way. It sounded a great deal like Occlumency training, in fact, at least the kind Snape had given Harry. Draco thought he could master it in no time.

He responded, but let his mind wander away, circling around the problem that had settled there for hours now: Syrix Gloryflower.

He honestly didn't think Harry would be attracted to her. It wasn't her face he feared. It was her mind. She had been a guardian, a soldier. Harry had been like her. Draco had seen a too-familiar expression on Harry's face when Syrix spoke up in that calm, austere manner she had. It was the look of longing he wore when he thought about how much he wanted to go back to being a defender, rather than a leader—the look he had worn last year when Voldemort cursed him to spend time in a dream-world he wouldn't want to come back from, and Harry had dreamed himself into a Hogwarts where everyone ignored him unless he could be of practical use.

Draco wondered if that would happen now. Syrix might not mean to, but she shared a connection with Harry that Draco never would, rather like his brother, and she could nudge Harry back in the direction of his training.

Draco decided firmly that he wouldn't let that happen. It would be subtle, but he would keep an eye on Syrix. At the same time, he would be starting his subtle plan to take revenge on Potter, and play with Michael.

I am going to be busy, he thought, as he gave Michael a warm smile and pretended he didn't notice his reaction. Good thing that my parents raised me to attend to several things simultaneously.

Lucius put the finishing touch on his letter and softly called Julius, the great horned owl he kept to deliver truce-dance gifts and other messages of extreme importance. Julius had consented to be Lucius's messenger to the Unspeakables without fuss. He seemed to find something important about flying directly to the most notorious,

and dangerous, Department in the Ministry. He extended his leg now, and flew out the window of the Manor the moment Lucius finished binding on the envelope.

Lucius knew the answer would come in the form of another piece of gray parchment with an hourglass sigil, probably placed discreetly under his door, on the table beside his bed, or another place where Narcissa would be unlikely to discover it. He could not respond in the same way, and he did not know how the Unspeakables were reaching him so directly. He had to trust that they would not harm him.

He could feel himself smile, though he knew the expression would look more like a snarl to any observer. Or, rather, trust in the Manor's wards to protect me if they ever do try to harm me.

He hoped the Unspeakables would accept his latest offer. He had led up to this little by little, making reasonable requests he knew would be denied, asking questions he knew wouldn't be answered, and suggesting delicately that he feared for his life and influence over Harry if Harry discovered what he was conspiring at. The Unspeakables had responded as Lucius hoped. They would use what he had finally offered to distract Harry so thoroughly that he would be busy dealing with the consequences of the offer, not who had made it.

Lucius was sorry to do it; he would not have if the Unspeakables had not approached him, because then there would never have been the chance of Harry finding out about the torture of his parents and the subduing of Auror Mallory. And he knew that it violated the terms of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, and if Harry found out, he would drain his magic.

But that only made it more exciting. And besides, with this person firmly removed from the Alliance, then Lucius's influence over Harry could only grow.

He let his gaze go to the front page of the Prophet, and narrow. The anti-werewolf hysteria had finally subsided enough, as they moved into the second week of September, for the news about the Grand Unified Theory that supposedly proved purebloods were inferior to

Mudbloods to return. And now Thomas Rhangnara was suggesting that there really was nothing purebloods could do to control the magic in their children. In fact, he said, magic responded badly to most forms of restriction. It respected the choices of mothers, it respected bloodline to a certain extent and the place and time the child was born and a few dozen other factors, but it wanted to have its own will, too. It came especially to those individuals who showed through their lives that they valued freedom.

Ridiculous, Lucius thought. If that were true, my father would never have become magical at all.

But that only made him remember the claims that Abraxas was halfblood, infused with what Rhangnara chose to call “hybrid vigor,” and that only made him murderous once more. Lucius rose to his feet and paced towards his library.

He knew killing Rhangnara would do little good. It was too likely to reveal him, and in any case, there were many other “research wizards” willing to claim the same nonsense that Rhangnara believed.

But Lucius knew a certain set of spells that could make Rhangnara retract what he had said. And some spread like a disease; those Rhangnara argued with would be more likely to begin believing his new version. Start a split in the so-far-united ranks of those studying the Grand Unified Theory, and others would doubt.

The spells were dangerous, powerful, and difficult to work properly, but Lucius intended to try them.

He will be quiet, our family will be free from the taint of Mudblood heritage, and my influence over Harry will increase as Rhangnara’s star falls. There is no battlefield on which I do not win.

Warmth. Darkness. Confinement. Comfort. She did not want to rise. Why should she? She was comfortable where she was.

But a prickle on her left side kept waking her up, like the sudden stab of a thorn through her flesh. She remembered the oath she had

sworn, the debt she owed. She sighed, and at last she stretched her arms and woke.

Dirt shifted above her. Tendrils tore around her, birthing her suddenly back into light brighter than any she had seen in months. She shook her head and raked dirt out of her hair and eyes with carefully moving fingers. Her eyes watered and ran with the light, but they adjusted quickly.

Indigena Yaxley blinked and looked down at herself. She smiled slightly as she saw that the shadow of plants under her skin was no longer faint. Now she looked like a construct of blossoms, bushes, and leaves wrapped in a human form that could burst at any moment. The thorny rose wrapped around her wrist, the poison of which could kill in a few hours, had sprouted more thorns and dug in further, even as the petals turned a deeper blood-red. The flower rustled and lifted in response to her gaze. Indigena nodded. As if it had spoken to her, she knew how else it had changed. It was more sentient now, and the poison it delivered through its thorns would kill in a few minutes instead of a few hours.

That was a common trait of all the magic she bore, she found, when she examined the rest of her body. The long slumber underground had changed her, indeed, but not only physically. She felt more connected to the plants she had put into her skin, and to the great gardens and greenhouses of Thornhall, as if they and she together formed an ecosystem of their own. Her brown-blond hair had streaks of vines, now, and she knew that her dark eyes probably had no pupil, only a drowning well into green. Thorns on thin tendrils wrapped her shoulders, glittering silver projections that slid into sheaths within her skin like claws. Indigena willed them to lash in front of her, and they did, with frightening speed and quickness, impaling the remains of the cocoon she had used to recover from Hawthorn Parkinson's blood curses.

The only part of her unchanged was the Dark Mark on her left arm, and it called her now. Her Lord had need of her. As Indigena was the only Death Eater he had trusted with the knowledge of his secret resting place, she wasn't at all surprised. The rest of the Death Eaters

had probably died in the assault on Hogwarts. She suspected that she would die, too, before all was done.

But none of that mattered to the debt of honor she owed, and none of that mattered to the instructions her Lord had given her for this eventuality.

She spent a moment stroking the plants that had cradled her, giving them instructions to regrow the cocoon in case she ever had need of it again. Then she strode rapidly into her house, nodding in approval as she found it bereft of dust thanks to the house elves, and retrieved several objects.

One was a roll of parchment, with a Never-Ending inkwell attached to it. Indigena had often found need of it, and that would be especially true in the coming months.

Another was a Pensieve. Her Lord would want to study the battle, and whatever had happened afterwards, so that it could not happen again.

Another was a list of names. Karkaroff and the other Continental Death Eaters had made contact with many, many people in various countries of Europe who had shown some interest in supporting the Dark Lord. Not all of them had received Voldemort's personal approval to become Death Eaters, and not all would, Indigena knew. Some only wanted to join for money, or because they felt the Light was growing too powerful in their own homes, or because they were fearful of the sheer concentration of Lord-level power in Britain and wanted to disrupt it. But any number of them could be useful.

Another was the set of books she had found to have information on Falco Parkinson. He was an enemy to her and her Lord, no matter what he might do to aid them. Indigena was determined to stop him, once she found out what he had achieved in the few months she had been underground.

And last but not least was an ancient book her Lord had last discussed with her a few days before the assault on Hogwarts. Indigena did not know how her grandmother had come to have

possession of it, but she had, and it had been treasured just as all dangerous and beautiful objects were treasured among the Yaxleys.

Its cover said Odi et Amo in tiny letters. Indigena blew the dust off it, and placed it carefully into her trunk.

Then she shrank the trunk and went to give final instructions to her house elves. It didn't take long. They were well-trained and obedient, and the more willing to serve her because Indigena had always treated them well. She didn't see the point to some of the mindless cruelties her peers indulged in.

Then she was on her way, stepping out of Thornhall to take in the wide sweep of moor beyond. It was a misty day in early September, the sun barely peering through a mass of silver. The primary colors were gray and green and brown. Indigena took a deep breath, smelled all the things growing, and felt her heart swell.

I will die, she thought, because everyone does. But first I'll live.

She walked a few steps on the moors, absorbing the sunlight and loving it, before she Apparated to her Lord's side.

Intermission: Disaster, Thy Name Is Regulus

“Severus.”

Snape stiffened at the sound of his first name, and glanced over his shoulder. Regulus Black stood behind him in the early summer darkness, his head cocked and his eyes gleaming with intensity. Snape didn't remember that intensity from school. Granted, Regulus had been a year younger than he was, even if they were in the same House, but Snape had made it his business to know him, since he was Sirius Black's brother. He should have noticed something like this.

“What are you doing here?” Snape asked. “Here” was the remains of a wizarding community just past the Scottish border. It was the closest the Death Eaters had yet attacked to Hogwarts, but Snape knew that would change. Besides, angering Dumbledore and panicking his followers hadn't been the main reason they staged this attack where they did. It was a sufficiently isolated place to test the Black Plague spores that Adalrico Bulstrode had finally managed to create. The Dark Lord was not entirely pleased with the results, however, so it would be some time before the spores saw use in formal battle. Snape nudged the remains of a swollen body with his foot, and wrinkled his nose. His Lord had ordered him to search for tatters of bubo-marked skin which he could brew into a potion to neutralize the plague. It would be important to have that for the Death Eaters once the spores worked properly, Snape knew, but he found the task distasteful. The bodies stank.

“I'm out of Hogwarts now.” Regulus leaped lightly over a body and joined Snape, giving a peculiar shudder as he landed. The smell did take getting used to, Snape thought. Regulus rolled up his sleeve and thrust his left arm under Snape's nose, forcing him to confront the Dark Mark. “And I chose to follow our Lord.”

Snape glanced quickly at Regulus, then away. “Of course you did,” he said. He wondered why the news should have surprised him. Everyone knew that Sirius Black had run away from home at the end of Christmas holidays in their sixth year, and that his parents had disowned him and settled on Regulus as their heir. Of course the

Dark Lord would court the only heir of such a prominent, Dark, pureblood family, since the oldest son was beyond his reach and firmly wrapped up in the webs of the Order of the Phoenix.

“Yes.” Regulus kicked at a body, then shook his head. “How do you stand the smell?”

“Not easily.” Snape saw a woman with a still-intact black bubble on her chest, and knelt, using a Cutting Curse to remove the patch of infected skin. Blood spread where it had been in a sluggish, disinterested stain. He rose and wrapped the skin in a bit of cloth, tucking it into his robe pocket. “Did the Dark Lord send you to find me?”

Regulus jumped a bit. “Oh! Yes, he did. He said that he wanted you to return to him as soon as possible. Something even more urgent than creating a potion to resist the plague has arisen.” His voice fell into a stentorian imitation of Voldemort’s tones. Probably unconscious, Snape decided. At least, he hoped it was unconscious. He would not live long if their Lord decided that Regulus was mocking him.

“Then we must go to him at once,” said Snape, and turned to stride over the ground paved with sprawled limbs and burst organs.

“Of course,” said Regulus again.

It took Snape a full three minutes to realize he had reached the edge of the village and Regulus wasn’t with him. He turned around, an impatient comment on his lips.

He saw Regulus kneeling over a woman whose head had leaped off her neck when the spores landed, carefully aligning the broken pieces of skin once more and closing the head’s eyes. Snape wondered, incredulous, if he would say a mending spell, but Regulus seemed to realize how inappropriate that would be. He just stood, nodded a moment at his handiwork, and then hurried after Snape. He even took the lead a moment later, in fact; Snape had to stand still and stare after him, wondering what in the world had prompted him to make that unnecessary gesture.

“He’s dead.”

Snape came very close to breaking his glass stirring rod on the side of his cauldron. He tended to enter brewing so deeply that he was not aware of what was happening around him. A weakness, he knew, and one that he must take steps to correct. He laid the stirring rod gently aside, without letting his hand tremble, and turned to face Lucius.

“Do you think I keep track of your comings and goings, Lucius?” he drawled, and had the satisfaction of seeing Lucius’s triumph-flushed face turn red for a different reason. “Who is dead?”

“Gideon Prewett,” said Lucius, with savage satisfaction. “And his brother Fabian. It took us five of them, but we brought them down.”

Snape nodded curtly, to keep from saying something unfortunate, namely how pathetic it was that it had taken five Death Eaters to kill two Light wizards. Yes, the Prewett twins were famous, respected wizards, but the Dark Lord’s followers were supposed to be more powerful—those who had the desire and the will to conquer death.

“Enjoy your prize, Lucius,” he said, as he turned back to his potion. Voldemort had wished for a potion that would allow anyone to mimic the effect of the Dementor’s Kiss. So far, Snape was having no luck. There was simply not enough information available about Dementors, even in the vast libraries he had access to as Voldemort’s trusted servant; few wizards had ever been interested in them.

“I will,” said Lucius, his voice gone languid and content. “This is the last of the major attacks for a month’s time, and Narcissa is waiting.”

Snape heard the pop of Apparition from behind him, and returned to his cauldron. Or, he tried to return to his cauldron. In a few moments, he had to put the stirring rod down and pace in a circle. He made sure it looked as if he were trying to stretch muscles tense from the bowed position the brewing had put him in. He was largely alone in this wing of the Riddle house, but one never knew who might be

watching. And, of course, his Occlumency barriers were up, as they always were.

He could not show that the tension in his muscles came from wild contempt, of the kind he had felt a year ago for the Mudblood children killed in his initiation.

He had known when he came into the Death Eaters that few were like him, either in level of magic or level of dedication. They were there because they feared death or wanted to follow the Dark Lord on his quest to create a pureblood world free of taint. Snape had accepted that he would have to work beside people he did not understand and did not like. That had always been true, because there was no one in the world like him.

He had not known that he would despise them so much.

They bragged when their own blood pride should have told them to keep silent. They resorted to ugly and obvious spells where simple, elegant ones would have done—in fact, where their Lord had commanded them to be careful, because he did not want a certain attack to be revealed as a Death Eater one yet. Then they seemed surprised when the Dark Lord kept his word and tortured them for their failures. They made the same mistakes again and again. They denigrated the care Snape took over his potions and did not understand why their Lord valued him, even when he explained. They smashed interesting magical treasures recovered in their raids as easily as they smashed the skulls of Mudbloods.

Snape had never known there would be so little grace in what he had become.

“Severus?”

That would be Regulus, the only one who persistently called him by his first name other than the Dark Lord—and since the first time he had met Voldemort, Snape had never failed to sense his magic and be kneeling when Voldemort entered a room. He cut off his circling at once and faced Regulus, his robes snapping to behind him. “What?” he snarled.

Regulus blinked, then held up his hand. "I thought you might want to see this," he said. "I just came back from a visit to my parents, and they agreed that I could take it to show you."

Snape drew breath to bark a retort, and then the silver globe lying in Regulus's palm came to life. It opened its sides as wings made of light, and Snape saw the gleam of stars on deep, velvety blackness. In the center of them was a golden dot of sunshine, and the planets of their solar system dancing around it.

He came closer, and stared. He had never seen any magical device so intricate on so small a scale. Whoever had made this had replicated the colors of Saturn perfectly on a globe the size of Snape's thumbnail, and the others were smaller. Yet, when Snape murmured a spell that sharpened his eyesight, he could make out the gleam of green continents on the Earth globe. It was perfect down to the last and the smallest.

This was what Snape had once believed all magic should be: calm grandeur, going about its beauties, not even noticing the efforts made to hinder it.

He gazed, and gazed, and when he looked up, Regulus was watching him. His face had relaxed, though, and he said nothing, only nodded with a small smile before he gathered up the globe and took it away with him. He could get away with the smile, Snape thought. Regulus was known to smile and joke like that—it was put down to him being both young and the spoiled heir of a prominent family—and appreciation of art was not disapproved of among the Death Eaters, though many of them didn't see the use of it, and lacked the wits to do it themselves.

Strange, Snape reflected as he began brewing again, that the only Death Eater who seemed to show him something of grace and beauty was Sirius Black's brother.

"Amputo!"

Snape roared the word, and the Order of the Phoenix witch facing him fell screaming, trying to lift her wand and unable to do so. Of course, it didn't help that the spell had wrenched her left arm away from the rest of her body and left it lying on the ground, and that her left hand clutched her wand. All that remained sticking out of her left shoulder was a bag of bone and flesh about the size of Snape's wrist.

He could have left it there. The blood loss and the shock would have finished her, and he was needed elsewhere in the battle; he could hear spells exploding around him as the Death Eaters fought to turn the Order's ambush into a victory for their side.

But he could not leave yet, because it was not enough.

He focused on the witch again, and whispered, "Coquo."

The spell curled around her legs first, and the woman began howling, a noise of pure misery that didn't sound human, but reminded Snape irresistibly of a werewolf's cry. He shuddered, but he didn't look away from his victim. It wasn't the full moon, and in any case Fenrir Greyback had been assigned to a different part of the battle, as he always was at Snape's request. He had the leisure to stand still and watch as digestive acids consumed the woman's feet, then her thighs, then her groin. The howl as she was eaten below the waist made something like peace come back into Snape's heart.

She was a torso with a right arm and a head now, and still alive. Snape wasn't done with her yet. "Torridus."

The Dehydration Curse wrinkled her skin, and the woman tried to cry out again in misery, but she had no saliva left in her mouth, and therefore could make no sound. Her eyeballs rolled crisply in her head. Her hair crackled as she waggled her neck. Her skin gleamed with a dull patina in the firelight behind her; Snape had taken her sweat away.

Snape smiled. He saw, from the corner of his eye, someone who had been approaching him back away. He didn't blame that person.

He finished it. "Extorqueo."

Giant, invisible hands grabbed what remained of the witch and began twisting her head in the opposite direction from her body. Snape saw her mouth moving as her head traveled in a circle, and then the clean, crisp snap of her neck rang a good distance across the battlefield. A moment later, the invisible hands pulled her body and her head apart in a spray of blood. Snape blinked as blood flew across him, pattering his face, soaking his robes, and shards of bone rang past him like shrapnel. One sliced his cheek open.

He smiled.

“Severus?”

And then he turned and then he saw Regulus—Regulus, whom he had thought dead at the witch’s wand—and then he fell to one knee, overwhelmed, and Regulus was there, one hand tentatively resting on his shoulder.

“I—you didn’t need to do that,” Regulus whispered. “I was all right. And even if I hadn’t been—” Snape looked up to see him shaking his head, and he said no more, but Snape knew what he meant, as clearly as if he’d finished the sentence. Even if I hadn’t been, you shouldn’t have used those spells. You know more of grace than that. Clean kill, and move on.

Yes, Snape thought, he should have done that. He should have. Pleasure in torture was a refined amusement in the proper place.

A battle was not the proper place.

He felt a shifting as of continents inside him, and that was the first time in nearly two years that his scorn turned on himself, pouring over him like the flood of digestive acids from the Coquo spell. He should have known better. He knew how to take revenge. One took it in the best and safest way, and in the coolest frame of mind. One did not succumb to rage like a—

Like a Gryffindor.

That was the first time that Severus Snape looked at himself with clear eyes, and saw what he had become, and despised it. There was nothing of the grace or beauty or grandeur there should have been in the Death Eaters, and none in the Dark Lord, and none in him. The notion that he could walk through ugliness and remain untouched by it was gone. The notion that he could turn ugly and not care about it was gone.

And it was Regulus's fault, for retaining a note of grace that he probably didn't even realize he possessed, for calling Snape by his first name and trying to share beauty with him and advocating a cleaner revenge. He was the reason it all tumbled apart in Snape's mind, two years after his first meeting with Voldemort, and refused to put itself back together again.

Chapter Twenty-One: Confluences

On the day the article in the Daily Prophet came out that proved Aurora Whitestag and Philip Willoughby had decided to work together, Harry decided that he'd had enough of this nonsense and wanted to talk to people.

He came into the Great Hall to find people staring at him. Harry rolled his eyes. When they do that before breakfast, one thing is usually the cause: an article in the paper. He didn't think it was the Vox Populi, though. Most of the students still took that less seriously than the Prophet, and anyway, Hornblower was busy cutting his way through a forest of supposition about the Minister and his fitness to do his job right now. He hadn't published anything concerning Harry in the last five days.

Harry sat down at the Slytherin table. Millicent tossed a copy of the paper to him without a word. Harry nodded to her, and let his Levitation Charm catch it, holding it in the air in front of him while he spooned up porridge and poured pumpkin juice for himself. The shop in Hogsmeade he'd paid to deliver breakfast to him each day had proven less than imaginative about their choices, not that Harry minded the bland food that much.

VATES NEEDS MONITORS, OPPONENTS SAY

Monitoring Board May Be Best Compromise

By: Melinda Honeywhistle

"I have been worried that we haven't done the right thing so far," said Aurora Whitestag yesterday. "After all, the vates needs to concentrate on fighting the war against You-Know-Who. But I hope this new solution will be an acceptable compromise to both parties."

Whitestag was referring to the new petition brought before the Wizengamot yesterday, which asks for a monitoring board to be established on the former Harry Potter's activities. The members of the monitoring board would consist mostly of those parents whose children Harry killed before the Battle of Hogwarts, but a few

Wizengamot members and a professor from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry would be welcome as well, Whitestag said.

“Harry obviously needs some supervision,” she said. “He trained during the summer, but I think he returned to the wizarding world before his training was complete. He needs more. We can suggest tactics to him, and make sure that he isn’t using his magic irresponsibly. He benefits from our presence, and the whole of our world benefits from making sure the Boy-Who-Lived is properly trained. And properly watched over, of course.”

Philip Willoughby, whose daughter Alexandra died in the attack on Hogwarts, and who has petitioned to bring Harry to trial, appears to have thrown his support behind Whitestag.

“I’ve given up hope that I’ll ever see Potter put in Tullianum for his crimes,” he told this reporter yesterday. “But a monitoring board is a good idea. I’ve been beyond grateful that so many people in the wizarding world have paid attention to me, a Muggle father whose daughter was still looked upon as inferior by many of her peers. I’ve made good friends, and those friends will stand behind me to put the monitoring board in place, even as they stood behind me in the petition about the trial.”

Whitestag says that her own motive, and the motive of many of the parents of the Dozen Who Died, as the children have come to be known, is not vengeance for the dead, but simply making sure the entire wizarding world survives.

“There’s a good reason that no teenager has ever been a Lord,” she says. “They cannot be trusted with that much power. It’s not Harry’s fault that this happened to him. If anything, I think it’s our fault, the fault of parents and professors, for leaving him with abusive parents who twisted his sense of honor and justice. Under our care, he will learn more about what he can be, rather than just growing into whatever monstrous form he might achieve without us.”

Harry finished the article and shook his head, laying the paper on the table. Draco promptly snatched it, and Owen settled into place on the

other side of Draco, patiently reading around the jerking motions of his hands.

Draco said nothing when he'd finished. Harry went on eating, and waited for the storm to break.

"Why aren't you upset about this?"

At least Draco had hissed that into his ear, not shouted it to the Great Hall. Harry arched an eyebrow. "I am," he said. "But yelling about it won't do any good. They might not even get the Wizengamot to decide on this any time soon, given that they're occupied with deciding what to do about the werewolves. At least I'm forewarned. And I accepted consequences like this when I mercy-killed those children, Draco."

Draco shook his head. "You are infuriating," he said, but his voice was more resigned than anything else.

"I'm trying not to be," said Harry firmly, and pushed his porridge bowl away, standing. Draco stared at him. "I'm going to find Snape," Harry explained to that stare, "and ask if he's far enough along in his healing for him to want to see me."

"After what he said to you in Potions class the other day?"

"Yes," said Harry mildly. He had been hurt when Snape criticized his potion as he had never done in Harry's years at Hogwarts, casting aspersions not on his training—that training would have included Snape's teaching, of course—but on Harry's desire to experiment by himself, and implying that Harry thought himself too good to brew ordinary class assignments. It was such a reversal from a few weeks past, when Snape had trusted Harry with Potions work enough to lend *Medicamenta Meatus Verus* to him. Harry had thought about it for a while, though, and managed to calm down. It had been hurtful, but considering what Snape was going through right now, it was a miracle that he was rational enough to teach classes at all, never mind speak politely to a student. Harry thought it could even be an honor, though dubious, that Snape cared enough about him to single him out. Usually now, Snape just paced in circles around the room,

having put the instructions for the potion on the board, and stared at everyone.

“Why?”

“Because I want to see if I can help him in his healing, and I want to see if I can have my guardian back,” Harry said, and smiled at Draco before he trotted out of the Great Hall. Not surprisingly, Snape hadn’t been at breakfast. He avoided them now, since the first day of term when he’d come near to Transfiguring a Hufflepuff girl into something embarrassing. Harry thought that meant Snape was listening to Joseph’s advice, and that was a hopeful sign.

He made his way to Snape’s quarters, all the time counting the minutes in his head before Potions. It should be enough time. He’d made sure to come to breakfast early, and the Potions classroom wasn’t that far from Snape’s rooms. He had half an hour.

He had opened his eyes this morning, lain staring at the ceiling of their four-poster for a moment, listened to Draco’s soft snores, and realized that gestures of reconciliation wouldn’t go amiss. Waiting to discuss things because he didn’t want to infringe on someone else’s free will was only making assumptions, again. How could he know whether pride held them back, or anger, or simple misunderstanding of Harry and his motives, unless he asked? He hadn’t asked Snape what had happened between him and Camellia since that initial question. He hadn’t persisted in visiting Snape because he thought it might hurt him.

But it might hurt him if I stayed away, too. And I’m never going to know if I don’t ask.

He reached Snape’s door just as it opened. Joseph stepped out, his gray robes swirling around his ankles as he shut the door gently. He saw Harry, and frowned, shaking his head.

“This is not a good time, Harry.”

“Why not?” Harry tilted his head and waited. He felt poised, calm, balanced. He had accepted that there was no direction he could

move in that was free of mistakes. He could make a mistake in pressing the matter when Snape was so wounded. He could make a mistake in waiting to press the matter, because then Snape would assume Harry didn't care about his suffering. He could make a mistake in any tiny gesture or word that someone took the wrong way. He had to be willing to make those mistakes, and bear the consequences of them, and keep moving forward with a little more knowledge under his belt, eyes a little more open. If Snape's moods really did change as rapidly as the weather, then Harry would have to keep considering them, that was all.

"He had a very bad dream last night." Joseph murmured as if his words would hurt the air—or as if Snape were listening from inside the room, which Harry thought was much more likely. "A dream that involved memories he had not only pressed down to the bottom of his mind, but tried to destroy. He did give me permission to tell you they involved Regulus Black. And since Regulus is not here at the moment, there is little I can do to help him."

"And how is he in general?"

Joseph sighed. "The same. Willing to give me scraps and bits of information, but not explain specific twists in his soul. Convinced he is vile. Hurting and unwilling to show his pain, but wishing there was someone in the world who knew of it."

Harry nodded. "And is there anything that you think I can do, even if he doesn't want to see me or talk to me?"

"I don't see what," Joseph said. "Even I can see that he needs your presence, but I will not admit you to his rooms when he has asked me not to."

Harry bit his lip. "What about a letter?" he suggested. "That comes to him and lets him know that that I'm here and waiting, but he doesn't have to write back, or even read it, if he doesn't want to."

Joseph blinked. "That—that might work. But you know that he could write a letter full of the most violent abuse back to you?"

"I've taken worse." Harry found himself grinning. He was always happier when he had a plan, a way to move forward after being stuck in place. "And I want to speak to him, Joseph. If you don't think it will hurt him more than help, I'll take the chance."

Silence passed for a moment, while Harry went on gazing expectantly at Joseph and the Seer mulled it over. Then he nodded. "If you believe that you can stand it," he murmured.

"I can," said Harry. "And anyway, he needs it. And I love him, so there you go." He smiled at Joseph one more time, then turned and made his way towards Potions class, already composing his letter in his mind. When he was far down the dungeon corridor, he heard the door of Snape's quarters open and then close, but he didn't look back. If Snape had come out to peer after him, Harry would let him have the sight of Harry he seemed to want, without forcing his guardian to meet his gaze.

Does it really matter who makes the first gesture of reconciliation, who reaches out first? No. This isn't a sacrifice, and I'm not doing it to be a sacrifice. Snape can tell me to fuck off, and I'll fuck off. He can yell at me, and I'll accept that.

Now, after Potions class, I'll find Connor and approach him. I think I can catch him on the way to Defense Against the Dark Arts. Really, the fight he had with Draco was silly, and I should have given him the chance to tell his side of it long before this. At least arrange a time for us to use a Pensieve.

Snape did not feel human.

He also did not want to go into the dungeons and teach the Potions class.

But McGonagall had given him the terms for his remaining at Hogwarts, and this was one of them. And if he was forced to leave Hogwarts and go elsewhere...Snape did not know how he would survive. He knew he would be less than he was here, a sack of blood and bones and charred memories. He had essays to mark and classes to teach as long as he remained Potions Master.

The only advantage being away from Hogwarts might offer was being away from Harry.

Since he had started dreaming of Regulus and the part Regulus had played in driving him back to the arms of the Light, he had found it harder to tolerate being around Harry. He wanted to see Harry. He watched him when he ate in the Great Hall during lunch and dinner, talking with the other Slytherin students or lost in contemplation or arranging dueling club meetings. He wanted Harry to come to him, to apologize for sending Snape away from Copley-by-the-Sea, and explain that he had punished Camellia and she would never touch Snape again.

But he did not want Harry near him at the same time. He could not forgive him for being absent as he suffered the dreams, or summoning Joseph and leaving him to the Seer's nonexistent mercies. He wanted Harry to understand, but not ask questions. He wanted Harry to realize what the dreams were doing to him, but he didn't want to have to tell him about the dreams.

He knew that was irrational. That only made the pain worse, particularly when days passed and Harry made no effort to seek him out at all.

And then, today, Harry had come and spoken to Joseph outside the door, and Snape had listened. Harry spoke of writing a letter to him. Snape hated the thought of it, at once. Harry should have known better than to reach out to him after the dreams of Regulus that tormented him night after night.

Harry doesn't know about the dreams of Regulus, whispered his saner mind.

Snape didn't care. He should have known. Harry was a Legilimens. He could have met Snape's eyes and read the dreams out of his mind. That Harry wouldn't do such a thing because of his dislike for compulsion of any sort was worse, because it suggested Harry prized his precious principles above Snape, and only confirmed another old truth his mother had told him: that no one would ever love him above

anything else. Harry had only cared when he was essential to the cause, and now that Snape had revealed his wounds and his bitterness, he had turned away.

The thoughts, mad and sane, and the bitterness made a rope so strong that Snape nearly let himself hang from it rather than listening to the words Harry spoke to Joseph. And then he laughed aloud when it was done, because Harry expected vileness from him.

How can he, after all I have done for him?

But if Harry had not, then Snape would have despised him for not learning the lessons he had tried to teach the boy. Only a fool would assume he would write a calm, coherent letter back in this state, or even try to communicate at all. No matter which way Harry turned, he was a fool.

“Are you fit to teach today?”

Snape looked up. Joseph had come back through the door, and stood leaning against it, watching him thoughtfully.

“I must be,” Snape rasped out.

Joseph nodded. “And if the letter comes and you don’t want to read it, you can always burn it.”

So Joseph knew he had overheard—or he guessed it, because it was the kind of thing someone with Snape’s pitch-colored soul would do. Either assumption was unacceptable. Snape snarled at him and turned away.

Joseph said nothing else, which Snape was grateful for. He prepared for the Potions class in quick, efficient movements. He had already memorized the recipe for the potion. He would put it on the board and leave his students to follow it as best he might. A glare from him was usually enough to put even the most confident and skilled of the sixth-year NEWT students off their careful following of instructions.

Hermione Granger had made small mistakes in each class since the start of term.

He strode into the corridor, his face formed into a cold mask, his hands clenched around his wand. If he had met anyone on the way there, he didn't know what would have happened. But he did not, and he opened the door of his classroom and swept in, coldly pleased to note that a few talking students scrambled into their seats.

"Twelve points from Hufflepuff for slowness," he said coolly, because Susan Bones hadn't moved fast enough. She lowered her eyes, her face the picture of misery.

Snape waved his wand, and the Potions recipe appeared with a short bang of colored smoke. He turned around and let his gaze sweep across their faces menacingly, silently instructing them to get to work. Most of the students ran for the ingredients closet at once. Only three didn't move: Draco and Granger, who always copied down the instructions or checked them against their books before they did anything else—

And Harry, who sat calmly in his seat, staring at Snape with large green eyes.

Snape stared, unblinking, pouring all the malevolence of commingled pain and hatred into his gaze, using it as a blade to slice at Harry's Occlumency barriers. Harry gave a small smile, and then his barriers fell and Snape found himself in a mind he barely remembered.

Harry's thoughts had changed since the last time he had seen them. Then, they had resembled a steel skeleton barely touched with leaves. Now they were a living tree, and the dark spaces between the branches that had once been filled with uncertainty curled with new twigs and new leaves—emotions and experiences Harry had had no context for, before. Snape stared.

Harry nudged softly at his Legilimency. Snape complied, so caught off-balance was he, and found himself looking straight into Harry's love for him.

It cut like sunlight and hurt like blades. Harry didn't expect that Snape would wake up from his pain one day and return to the person he had been. He knew the healing might last the rest of his life. He knew that Snape might never be his guardian again, might never speak to him directly again, might be useless to the war effort and Harry's vates path from this moment forward.

That didn't matter. Harry's love for him would still exist, because Harry's love for him didn't depend on any of those things.

Snape felt his carefully constructed reality sliding away from him. He had known, even as he raged about Harry refusing to speak to him more directly, that he had no right to expect this kind of devotion. Eileen Prince had been right. That kind of devotion didn't exist.

And here it was, staring back at him.

Snape snapped his gaze away and snarled, "Mr. Potter. Do you wish for the low mark you will receive if Mr. Malfoy does all the work? Begin."

And he could feel Harry smiling even as he rose from his seat to obey, because Snape had slipped enough to call him by the last name he had discarded.

Snape didn't need to open Harry's letter. When it came, he would burn it, but not because he didn't want to read it. He would burn it because he already knew what it would say.

Why should this change things? he thought, scrambling to rebuild the mask Harry had destroyed. After all, his love could still be a sham, or a lie. He could still love you mainly because of what you have been to him, and not for the person you now are. He has made no effort to learn what you are now.

But Snape doubted that any rationalization he could make would dent or damage the fact of that love. He could change his mind. He could rage. He could storm. He could drive Harry away, or attempt to split open his heart with the cruelest words he knew. He could decide that he would never see Harry again.

None of that would change the fact that the love existed, and would go right on existing, in spite of him.

Harry caught up with Connor just as Connor was about to duck into the safety of the Defense classroom. The first thing Connor knew of his presence was the hand on his shoulder that tugged him gently to the side and leaned him against the wall. "Can I talk to you?" his brother asked him.

Connor thought of refusing. He should, he knew. Parvati was right. Harry could have solved the whole problem between him and Malfoy by demanding Connor's side of the story when the argument had first happened. Connor would have given in with just a little more pressure. He wouldn't have wanted to apologize to Malfoy, but doing that and explaining were two different things.

On the other hand, Harry had caught him. Connor didn't want to yell at Harry in front of the other NEWT Defense students. Parvati would want him to avoid making a scene.

"I suppose," he said, ducking his chin into his chest and scowling up at his brother from beneath his fringe.

Harry just nodded. "I wanted to know if I could hear what happened between you and Draco," he said. "If you don't want to tell me or can't remember everything, I can get hold of a Pensieve, and you can put the memory in there. Then I can watch it and make my own decisions."

Connor blinked, his mouth coming slightly open. "Did you use Legilimency on me?" he snapped.

"What? Of course not." Harry blinked back at him. "Why would I have?"

"That's what I wanted to do!" Connor exclaimed. "Tell you the truth, everything, with just a bit more prompting. But instead it lapsed into silence for two weeks, and you didn't make any effort to pick it up again."

Harry winced. "I know, Connor," he said. "I'm sorry. That was a mistake on my part. If I really want to consider myself as respecting the free will of everyone, then I need to know more about those people and what they want, and I need to approach them instead of letting the wounds between them and me fester." Connor nodded in approval. That was something like the apology Parvati thought Harry should have given, though not as detailed. "Now. Can I hear?"

"After class," said Connor. "In a Pensieve," he added, because he didn't think that he could recall all the details of the conversation, and he didn't want Harry to think of him as biased.

Harry nodded, and then Malfoy arrived behind him and took his arm, giving Connor a condescending look. Connor just rolled his eyes and made his way to the back of the class. Malfoy might be with Harry from now on, as his boyfriend, just the way Ron had said, but he didn't have to like it.

And after what Harry sees in the Pensieve, then he probably won't like Malfoy quite as much, either.

Connor settled into his seat and contemplated that pleasant prospect as Peter entered and swept to the front of the classroom. He was much less nervous today, Connor noted absently. Teaching did seem to agree with him, the longer he did it.

Harry pulled his head slowly out of the Pensieve he had borrowed—Draco's, used when he invented the spell that let one person experience another's mindset—and blinked, shaking drops of silvery liquid from his hair. Connor sat on his bed in the Gryffindor sixth-year boys' room, watching him anxiously. Harry sat back and shook his head again.

"I think we were all three at fault," he told Connor.

His brother's mouth fell open, and Connor spluttered, kicking out a foot behind him with such violence that it got tangled in the bed hangings. Harry waited, watching in silent amusement as Connor shook his head and clenched his jaw. Connor had not grown up all

the way yet. Such a child, still, sometimes, but I know he's capable of better things. And that hope tempered Harry's anger, and really, he should have allowed it to do so earlier. He knew how much good was in people. He was supposed to look for it, as vates. He should never have allowed his silent treatment of Connor to last so long.

Really, why do I lose my temper? It only does more harm than good. Accepting what other people do, and trying to talk to them about it, and accepting it if they get angry at me, are all more productive than offering them cold shoulders or harsh words.

"I wasn't!" Connor burst out at last. "He came into my room just to taunt me!"

"Then you taunted him back," said Harry, calm as steel.

"He didn't have to say what he did!"

"No, he didn't," Harry agreed. "And neither did you." He leaned forward, stretching out his hand to clasp his brother's. "Connor, did you think it would make him more sympathetic to halfbloods, to say that he would have to accept them?"

"No," Connor said sullenly, avoiding his handshake and looking at the floor. "I wasn't—I wasn't thinking about making him accept halfbloods, or arguing him into it. I just wanted him to shut up."

"And would you say that was childish?" Harry asked.

"No more childish than what he did!"

Harry leaned back against the pillow—he sat on Neville's bed, since Neville was in NEWT Ancient Runes right now—and tapped his fingers on his chin. Draco's ring caught the light and sparked it back at him, making Harry blink. Diamond afterimages raced across his vision as he glanced back at Connor. "But do you really want to be a child all your life, compared to him? Do you really want Gryffindors to seem childish next to Slytherins?"

"I suppose not," Connor said, staring at the floor. "I just don't see why I have to be the more mature one all the time."

"Oh, not all the time," said Harry. "But Draco is more mature most of the time." Connor sat up, his mouth flying open in protest, but Harry shook his head at him. "You know he is, Connor. He was trained to keep his composure. He's hexed you and attacked you, but you've done the same thing to him, and more often. He says horrible things about you, but to me or in his head. You tend to say them to his face."

"I thought you said we were all three at fault there, and not just me," Connor said from between gritted teeth.

Harry nodded. "I know. I was at fault for speaking to you so abruptly, and believing that the words I overheard were the whole story." They certainly had not been; according to the Pensieve memory, he had missed more than half the conversation. "I'm sorry for that. And Draco was at fault for intruding in the first place. He could have ignored you slamming your trunk." He took a deep breath and braced himself for Connor's anger. "But I think you were more at fault than he was."

Connor stared at him. Then he leaped to his feet and stalked towards the door.

"Connor?" Harry pitched his voice low and kept it gentle, and Connor halted, holding the door handle, scowling ferociously. "Will you hear me out?"

Connor gave a quick, jerky nod. Harry nodded back, and then spoke his thoughts as carefully and honestly as he could.

"It wasn't honorable to attack Draco that way, Connor," he said. "It wasn't Gryffindor. You knew how upset he was about the Grand Unified Theory. More to the point, you knew I'd sided with you over him, because I thought he was going to physically attack you that day in the kitchen, and you knew what had happened a few days before between Snape and Camellia. What you did was cruel and calculated and horrible in its timing."

“He has to learn to accept what you are,” Connor ground out. “I don’t see why you stay with him, Harry. He hates you for being a halfblood.”

“No, he doesn’t,” said Harry, a bit surprised that Connor saw it that way. “Why would he? I think he loves me more than any notion that purebloods are perfect. But everything changed so suddenly. And that is my fault, for not preparing him properly. I don’t think he realized that Thomas thinks—and I think—that pureblood culture is still a wonderful and valuable thing. Our main disagreement isn’t about the culture or the rituals. He thinks there’s a genetic difference between someone like him and someone like Hermione, and that the difference makes him superior. I don’t agree with that, but I can live with it. If he takes years to change his mind, so be it.”

“That’s disgusting, though.” Connor’s face had wrinkled itself up like the face of a small dog about to bark at someone. Harry entertained himself for a moment with the notion that his Animagus form might be a dog, then pushed it regretfully aside. He had to be serious right now.

“No more disgusting than what I did to both of you.” Harry cocked his head at him. “Or taking advantage of an opponent’s weakness.”

Connor’s eyes fell, and a blush of shame worked its way across his face. Harry waited. His brother might still have some trouble admitting he was wrong, but he couldn’t hide behind the notion that he was right any more.

Connor’s next words still caught him by surprise, though.

“How can you stand him?” he demanded, eyes flashing as he took a step back towards Harry. “Forget about the Grand Unified Theory, forget about blood. He’s cruel and mean-spirited and takes advantage of you. Why do you love him, Harry? Do you know that?”

It was Harry’s turn to flush as he remembered Christmas last year. He had told Draco why he loved him, an incredibly long list of reasons. He managed to give a short nod. “I do.”

“Then tell me.” Connor’s eyes narrowed further.

Harry looked away. "I don't want to share that with you, Connor," he said.

"Then I don't see why I should forgive him." Harry heard a rustle of cloth that he knew was Connor crossing his arms. "It sounds as if you are ashamed of yourself for loving him, really. You know that he's everything I said he was, and you're still attracted. Well, I can understand your bonding to him because he was your first friend here, but really, Harry, spending the rest of your life with him because of that?"

Harry felt angry heat fill his chest. He stood. "Are you willing to tell me all the reasons you love Parvati?" he demanded.

Connor shut his mouth so hard he nearly bit his tongue. "Well, no," he admitted at last. "It's a private thing."

Harry nodded. "And it's the same way with me."

"But no one cares why I love Parvati!" Connor took an insistent step forward. "I want to know why you love Draco. I'm asking you. I want to know. Why won't you tell me? Shame is the only reason I can think of. You'd think Draco would be happy to hear you reciting all the reasons—"

"There's no way I can win this game," Harry said quietly. "Don't you see that, Connor? If I tell you, then I'll betray Draco's privacy, and he's asked me not to do that." It was one of the requests Draco had made of him last year, his head pillowed on Harry's chest, his eyes soft and content. "If I don't tell you, you'll go on thinking I'm ashamed of him, or that it's just lust."

"I know it's not lust," Connor said dismissively. "Not with your training. But I really don't think he's good for you, Harry. How can I keep quiet when I think that? How can I not try to separate you from him? And how can I believe that you're not just blind if I don't hear your reasons for loving him?"

"I wouldn't try to separate you from Parvati, even if I thought she wasn't good for you," said Harry. "I accept that you love who you love, Connor."

"She's not the daughter of a Death Eater," said Connor. "She's not even a Dark witch. Has it occurred to you, Harry, that you could take a lot of hurt from Draco if he does decide that he would rather believe in pureblood superiority than in you? And what happens if he Declares for the Dark?"

"The same thing that happened when you Declared for the Light, I imagine," said Harry. "I still won't feel compelled to choose a side."

Connor was breathing fast, his face flushed with frustration. "I just wish I knew why you would choose him over me," he said. "That's all."

"I don't want to choose him over you," Harry whispered, holding out his arms. Connor didn't move into the embrace. Harry winced and dropped his arms, telling himself he had no right to feel angry or disappointed. His anger or disappointment would just cause so many more problems in the long run. "And I don't want to make you choose Parvati over me."

"I won't," said Connor. "I can balance. But I don't think that you can balance between us, Harry. We're too different. And I think you could be in danger from him." He gave a little nod, as if someone had offered him a command, and stood straighter. "I love you, Harry. I want to make sure you're safe."

"I don't need protection from Draco," said Harry, feeling tired.

"I think you do." Connor gazed at him, eyes wide and earnest. "I've thought about it a lot over the past two weeks, Harry, and I've talked it over with Parvati. But we had to wait and see what you would say. If you'd forgiven me and agreed that Draco's attitude was dangerous, I wouldn't have to do this. But I think he is a danger to you, and you'll only wind up getting hurt. I'm sorry."

I should have talked to him before this, Harry thought. I left it too long. It's my fault.

He took a deep breath and tucked the blame away, because unless the guilt could help him not to make the same mistake a second time, it was useless. He knew how Connor could change, wavering from moment to moment, abandoning prejudices that solidified in his mind when new information came along and seeing his way to clarity when he realized he'd made a mistake. He had nearly done that when Harry pointed out that attacking Draco via his pureblood beliefs wasn't honorable. Give it a few weeks, and he would probably change his mind again.

Connor seemed confused when Harry gave him a politely determined smile and walked past him to the door. "Harry?" he asked his back.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "We'll have to agree to disagree on this, Connor. Just know that I love you both. I wouldn't give up contact with you to please Draco—I didn't do it in third year—and I won't give up being Draco's partner to please you. I'm sorry. If you can't live with each other, I understand that. I won't make you act like best friends or brothers. I do love you both."

Connor tried to say something, but when Harry paused and waited, nothing emerged. He sighed gently and shut the door behind him.

This time, though, I won't just wait and wait for him to say something. I'll talk to him every day. I'll let him see that I'm happy with Draco. I'll show him the truth until that overcomes his willingness to embrace a lie.

Draco glanced at Harry curiously. Harry had seemed unusually fidgety that evening, even as Draco studied his Animagus notes some more and Harry tried to read information on place magic that Granger had researched for him. He'd said something about "entering the dream" when Draco asked, and Draco didn't understand what that meant, so he'd been willing to let it drop. He was more interested in how close he could come to the visualization now, anyway. He knew his form was four-legged, relatively small, and not bulky, but not what it was, yet.

“Draco,” Harry said abruptly, and Draco put down the notes and turned to face him at once, because Harry sounded near-panicked, something that never happened.

“What is it, Harry?” Draco asked, his eyes roaming his partner’s face. Harry was flushed, and the flush had crept everywhere except his lightning bolt scar, which stood out as a pale line on his forehead. Draco was just as glad not to see that turn red.

Harry shook his head, then abruptly grabbed Draco’s neck with his hand and drew him close for a kiss.

Draco blinked, but he was hardly about to object this, so he responded, grabbing at Harry’s shoulders and hair and pulling him forward. Harry pulled him backward, so for a moment they engaged in an undignified tug-of-war, and then they sprawled in the middle of the bed. Draco muttered a protest as his teeth hit Harry’s, and Harry gasped an apology, but didn’t stop kissing him.

Draco kicked out, trying to find a way to get a better purchase on Harry and stop just scrabbling around in the middle of the bed. Then the room smelled of roses, and Harry rolled him over again, with magic rather than a hand, and Draco found himself on his back, gasping as he stared up at Harry.

“Will you let me touch you?” Harry whispered to him. “Just—touch you? That’s what I want to do right now.”

It cost Draco actual physical pain to remove his hands from Harry’s skin, but he nodded. Harry murmured a thanks and then pulled at Draco’s tie and his shirt, taking them off so smoothly that Draco barely felt a brush of cloth across his skin. He thought Harry must have used magic, but it was very hard to look away from those green eyes, so he wasn’t sure.

“I love you,” Harry murmured, bowing his head and beginning to kiss his way down Draco’s chest. Draco gasped, wondering why he couldn’t speak, wondering why he wasn’t more panicked by the feeling of not being able to breathe, wondering why he suddenly

seemed to be lying in a bed of summer sunlight. “I don’t care if someone else disapproves, I know it might cause problems but that doesn’t mean I’ll stop loving you, and this sounds so stupid Draco but I don’t know if you’re listening to me right now anyway—”

Draco might have told him he was listening to him if Harry would just stop touching him. But he wasn’t, he was nipping and kissing and lucking and sucking, and Draco’s skin felt taut and stretched, as if all of it were ready to slip off his body and fly into Harry’s mouth. It was an effort to keep his hands at his sides, and he didn’t succeed, though they only flew up in loose fists when Harry stripped him of both trousers and pants, as efficiently as he’d stripped him of shirt and tie.

“Love you,” Harry said softly, and then took Draco in hand, stroking him with his hand and rolling over so that his hip lay against Draco’s, as if he wanted to surround him as much as possible with Draco still flat on his back in the bed, watching his face all the while.

Draco closed his eyes. He was adrift in gold. It altered and rippled in his mind, like sunlight changing through moving leaves. He had thought, foolishly, that the pleasure he shared with Harry would not change in essentials from one bedding to the next. It seemed he was wrong. This pleasure was keener, sharper, than that which they’d shared while tumbling on the floor in Silver-Mirror. Draco found he couldn’t keep his hips still as they rolled up in short jabs into Harry’s hand. He knew his breath was leaving his mouth in gusts of hot air, too. Light traveled past his eyes. He had lost track of the rest of his body. Mouth and eyes and cock—did he need to worry about the rest?

When he came, he heard Harry’s voice say something, but he couldn’t make it out under the intense pressure and pleasure inside and out. His head grew too heavy for his neck as he trembled out the last spasms of light and warmth, and then he knew where his hands were. He reached up and gripped Harry’s shoulder, pulling him down, managing to open his eyes just enough to whisper, “What did you say?”

"The usual," Harry whispered, kissing him. "I love you."

Draco tried to answer, he really did. But a huge yawn escaped his mouth, and the thought of moving hurt. He wanted to sit up, though, and reach down to touch Harry. He wanted to give him some hint of the pleasure he'd given Draco.

Harry kept his hand away when he tried, though, the metal of the ring on his finger cool against Draco's palm. "I'll be fine," he whispered. "I wanted to do that, to remind myself that you're real, that you're not just sitting on the other side of the bed and studying notes, but actually in my arms if I want you." Draco could hear him smiling, though he couldn't open his eyes to see it. "And in my hand."

Draco attempted a protest. "But, Harry—" He thought it should be stronger, and maybe it would really have been, but the warmth had traveled back into his limbs, puddling them. He could feel Harry rolling them over, so that he lay fully within Harry's embrace, and then he was fussed about until he didn't think any part of him was touching the blankets, but draped fully over chest and hips, groin and arms.

"I'm here," Harry murmured. "We're both here. Nothing's going to separate us, Draco." His arms tightened possessively around Draco's chest. "Go to sleep."

And Draco did, letting his head bob down until his nose rested in the crook of Harry's neck. The last thing he heard before he fell asleep was the soft, contented purring of Harry's magic, like the rumble of a great cat, and the last thought he had, absurdly, was, His Animagus form is a lynx.

Harry took a deep breath and shook his head before he walked into the Great Hall the next morning. He had something to say to his brother, and he had thought long and hard about the right words as he lay with Draco cradled in his arms last night, still a bit stunned by his own desperate need to feel Draco and be assured he was there and real.

Draco came up, brushing his shoulder against Harry's. Harry smiled at him, then moved towards the Gryffindor table.

Connor was sitting head-to-head with Ron, planning Quidditch strategies by the sound of it. He looked up in surprise at Harry, and then his face tightened in an expression of resignation.

“Come to scold me about yesterday?” he asked.

Harry stood surveying him for a moment. Connor looked as if he hadn’t slept well, but still stubborn, still determined, still trying to do what he thought was right. Just like he had been in third year, come to think of it, when he thought Harry was going to kill Sirius, or just like he had been in fourth year, when he was trying to go through the Triwizard Tournament despite being terrified of it, or just like he had been in fifth year, when he had chosen to testify at Lily and James’s trial and hadn’t told Harry about it beforehand, in case Harry tried to stop him.

We both think we’re right. This time, though, I’m not going to let misunderstanding get in the way, or sympathy for him make me look past it. He’s doing what he thinks is right, but that doesn’t change the fact that it’s fucking stupid.

“No, actually,” Harry said. “I’ve come to tell you that I’d like us to get along, Connor. I know that probably can’t happen yet, but it will in time. If you decide to marry Parvati, I’d like to be able to talk to my sister-in-law without screaming at her. And to my brother without screaming at him, as it happens. And I’d like you both to be able to talk to your brother-in-law without screaming at him.”

Connor’s face tightened with distaste. “Harry, Parvati told me some things about him that you should know—“

“And I’m going to listen to them,” said Harry with a nod. “But you should know, Connor, that I’ll never stop loving both of you, and trying to balance all three of you, making sure that you have what you want and what you need as far as that’s possible. And I won’t believe that Draco’s going to turn against me until he actually does.”

“Harry—“

“I’m not leaving him,” said Harry plainly. “He’s my partner. He’ll stay that way until the day he says he doesn’t want to be any more. You can argue and I’ll listen, Connor. But I won’t obey.”

Connor’s face tightened again, this time with frustration. “Harry, you could solve this whole dispute by telling me why you love him.”

“He doesn’t want me to. I don’t want to.” Harry cocked his head, watching Connor closely. “And I don’t think it would solve things; you would come up with another objection, Connor. I won’t ask you to love him. I will ask you to accept that I do.”

“If you would listen—“

“If you would,” said Harry, “you would hear what I’m trying to tell you. I love him. I won’t leave him. He’s mine, and I’m his. That’s the way it is.”

He paused, but apparently Connor didn’t have a counterargument for that right now; his face expressed nothing but dismay. Harry nodded once and turned away from the table.

On the way, he caught Ron’s eye. Ron raised his brows, then clenched his left hand into a fist in front of his heart. Harry smiled and returned the gesture of respect as best he could; it didn’t have exactly the same meaning, but since he lacked a left hand, he could tell Ron accepted it. He lingered long enough to hear Ron say, “You’re being a right idiot, mate,” which caused Connor to gape at him, and then he made his way back to the Slytherin table.

He met the owl who delivered his morning porridge from Hogsmeade, and stared unlading her. He merrily ignored Draco’s stare for quite some time, until Draco said, “So you had an argument with your brother about me.”

“Hmmm,” said Harry, pouring the porridge into the bowl it came with, and reaching for the vial of juice. Orange juice this morning.

“And you fought with him for me,” Draco said. “Why?”

Harry looked up. "What do you mean, why?"

Draco's face changed slowly, as if clouds were moving across it. Then he put his hand on Harry's arm and leaned in to kiss him.

Harry accepted it for a moment, returned it for a second moment, and then pulled back and sat down to eat his breakfast.

He kept feeling Connor's stare from across the way, and when Parvati joined him for breakfast, the stare redoubled. Harry didn't care.

Some of the people I love are being stupid right now. That's all right. They'll get over it, and I can wait for as long as they need.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Terror Runs On Four Legs

Harry heard Connor muffle a surprised squeak when he caught up with him and Parvati on their way to Care of Magical Creatures. "Can I walk with you?" he asked them, as politely as he could under the circumstances.

Connor just stared at him. Parvati leaned around Connor's shoulder and gave him a far more pointed stare. Harry bore it. She's concerned for Connor, he told himself. If Draco had a brother who ignored him most of the time, and that brother was dating a Dumbledore supporter, wouldn't I be concerned?

"You don't have Care of Magical Creatures," Parvati said.

Harry inclined his head, smiling. "No. But I have a free period, and I know Connor said Hagrid's lesson would be short today." The Magical Creatures classes had been abbreviated since Hagrid had taken a sting from a mysterious, and probably illegal, creature he was keeping in the Forbidden Forest. "So I thought I could speak with you after the lesson, if that's all right."

Parvati laid her hand on Connor's shoulder. Connor stopped walking and turned to look at her. Parvati whispered to him, suspicious eyes on Harry's face.

Harry waited some more. And waited. Parvati had a lot to say, but he would have had a lot to say, too, under similar circumstances. He plucked at some kind of flying bug who obviously thought his skin was a flower, and then they turned towards him, both faces gone equally resolute. Harry was glad that Connor had a girlfriend who could match him for determination.

"We've decided that you can talk to us after Hagrid's lesson," Connor allowed, voice and stance still wary. "But you have to be as open as you can, Harry. Don't start ranting the moment one of us says something you don't like."

"I promise," said Harry. He was glad that Draco wasn't present; trying to have all four of them together for this first extended conversation

with Parvati just wouldn't have worked. Draco had free time as well, but he'd chosen to spend it working furiously on visualization of his Animagus form. Michael was with him, so Harry didn't have to worry about his safety. "Should I meet you at Hagrid's hut, or somewhere else?"

"On the way back to the school," said Parvati, her hand still on Connor's shoulder. Her eyes remained hard as flint. "As we approach the entrance hall."

Harry nodded. "That's fine." Parvati blinked, but Harry meant what he said; he wanted both of them to be comfortable, so that they would talk with him instead of shouting, and he didn't care where they met, so it meant nothing that he'd given up control of that aspect to Parvati. "I'll see you in a short while."

He nodded to Connor, but gave Parvati a sweeping bow that he knew she would recognize, since she came from a Light pureblood family. The bow ended with a sweep of his hand at the level of his throat. Once, it had granted a sibling's consort power to mercy-kill one if necessary. Now, it was meant as a formal welcome into the family, a sign that he didn't object to Parvati's presence.

Connor was already walking on. Parvati lingered, staring, then shook out her long dark hair and hurried after Connor. Harry watched the way she took his arm. He smiled. She loves him, at least. She's not just playing with him.

He turned away. He would go back near the entrance hall and wait. For once, he had nothing else to do. He'd written his letter to Snape, concentrated dutifully on his Animagus transformation, talked to Camellia, read some more on the place magic information that Hermione had obtained for him, and finished his homework. There were advantages to feeling uneasy with laziness.

The owl met him as he entered the section of the grounds just in front of the castle. Harry looked up curiously. From the direction it was coming from, it might have just flown from the Owlery, but it settled onto his shoulder with a weary hoot. Harry clucked to silence the hissing Many snake around his throat, and took the envelope from

the bird, stroking her feathers. She buried her head against the side of his neck, trembling.

The envelope was actually the message itself, Harry saw, the parchment folded into the shape of a letter. The ink dashed across the paper, splattered with terror.

Dear Harry:

I was one of those who kept silent when your first offer of help arrived, because I didn't think I would need it. And now I do. September's full moon is rising, and I don't trust the Ministry to keep me safe anymore.

I am one of the three hunters who killed the werewolves in July. I know that you don't have any reason to like me, but the stories about you say you help even those whom you have a reason to dislike. So.

I want to come to you and shelter under your protection for the three nights of the full moon. I want to make sure Loki doesn't kill me. I saw what he did to Felicia. In return, I'll bring you information about the policies on werewolves that the Department plans to pursue next. You can demand other concessions of me if you like, but please, please help me.

Kieran Morologus.

Harry caught his breath. His hand crumpled the parchment, and a stir of magic rose around him that made the owl stir, as well, spreading her wings and hooting uneasily.

Harry had to work to catch his breath and calm down before he could think about the request, and even then, his first impulse was to refuse. Kieran had brought this on himself by hunting werewolves and scalping them. Harry thought he might even have been the hunter in the Daily Prophet photograph who had held Briar and Gudrun's scalps in the air, grinning. It would be a betrayal of the pack and a betrayal of the dead to help him.

But, Harry reminded himself reluctantly, as his ethics tugged at him, he had reached out to the Department for the Control and

Suppression of Deadly Beasts after Loki's attack and informed them that he would try to heal the damage wrought. He hadn't warned them well enough, not if Loki could still take them so entirely by surprise. And he had managed to ignore the horrible things that his former Death Eater allies had done. And Loki's vengeance, if achieved, would only make things worse for his pack. It certainly had last month, as more and more people became in favor of restricting werewolves. If Loki hadn't sworn himself to revenge, then some of the hysteria might have died away, and they might be further along the path to a peaceful solution by now.

It didn't take Harry long to make up his mind. He could do nothing to bring back the dead, but he could try to spare the living. And if Kieran would give him information on the Department's policies, then he could protect his pack. There was still the chance that they would view it as a betrayal, of course. In that case, Harry would step aside as alpha and hope they appointed Camellia.

He cast the Summoning Charm to bring him ink, parchment, a quill, and owl treats from his room. The owl on his shoulder shivered again as the items zoomed past her, but ate the treats gratefully from his palm. Harry supposed she must have picked up on part of her owner's terror, and he was sorry for it. Whatever Kieran might have done or not done, she didn't deserve the fear.

"You're beautiful, aren't you?" he murmured, running his fingers through her feathers. And she was; a barn owl, but nearly as pale as Hedwig on the belly and under her wings, while her golden eyes had a hint of green. "You don't mind taking a reply back?"

She already sounded better as she gave a little hoot and traced a strand of his hair through her beak. Harry smiled and sat down to write the letter, telling Kieran that he would protect him, and giving him a detailed description of Wayhouse. They certainly could not face Loki at Hogwarts, Harry wouldn't ask the pack to leave Grimmauld Place or Copley-by-the-Sea, and Silver-Mirror had too many treasures in it that he could see Kieran handling "accidentally," or Loki breaking when he attacked.

Harry handed the letter back to the owl, and spent some time coaxing and petting her before she would take off. Then he sat back and summoned a mental calendar into his head. He nodded. The first night of the full moon was the twenty-fifth, and it was the eighteenth now. That should leave him plenty of time to prepare, including strengthening Wayhouse's wards to meet the assault and contacting Gloriana Griffinsnest to see what she could tell him about werewolves on the vengeance-path.

"Harry!"

When he looked up, Connor and Parvati were approaching him. Harry stood to meet them, but Parvati shook her head, gesturing him back onto the steps. "You'll want to be sitting down for the vast majority of this," she said, grimacing. "You won't like what we have to tell you."

True, but probably not for the reasons you think, Harry decided, and sat down, giving her an expectant look. Parvati arranged herself in front of him. Connor stood beside her, clutching her hand. Parvati squeezed back, now and then running her palm over his.

"You may not know all the details of the crimes that Lucius Malfoy committed," Parvati announced. "My father fought in the First War. He knows. He testified at Malfoy's trial, trying to get him convicted. It didn't work, of course, because he managed to convince the Wizengamot he'd been under Imperius all along. But my father knows the details."

"So do I," said Harry, a bit surprised. Didn't Connor tell her I studied the history of the First War as part of my training? "I know that he was involved in the death of Edgar Bones, of the Prewett twins, of the Nascent children. There are other allegations that can't be proven, but I don't have much doubt they're true. He was at the Battle of Valerian, for example, according to the Ministry's reports." He grimaced, feeling a sour taste fill his mouth. Along with Lily, he really preferred the title "Slaughter of Valerian" to the official name. The inhabitants of the village had had no chance to fight back against Voldemort's flesh-eating rain.

“And you aren’t at all worried that the father’s tendencies have passed on to the son?” Parvati’s eyes were sharp, her mouth very wide. “Particularly given that he has hexed Connor more than once, and he used Dark Arts in the battle?”

Harry gave her a hard look. “There’s a difference between using Dark Arts, and using them maliciously.”

“They’re still Dark magic,” Parvati insisted.

“I know,” said Harry. “But I’ve used them myself. I’ve taught the members of the dueling club how to use them, including you and your sister. Did you really forget that?” Disappointment was welling up in him, no matter how much he tried to push it back down, tell himself it did no good. “Ardesco, which I demonstrated and which a lot of you picked up at once, is a Dark Arts spell.”

“I found them hard to use,” said Parvati quietly. “And so did Padma. But Malfoy uses them well enough. And he’s frightfully vengeful and jealous over you.” Harry only nodded; he couldn’t really disagree there. “Aren’t you worried that he might use Dark Arts on someone else, just because that person insulted you or—or was less than perfectly kind to you?”

Harry blinked as his estimation of Parvati turned a corner. “You’re afraid of him, aren’t you?” he whispered.

Parvati gave a violent shiver, then lifted her head. “I’m Gryffindor,” she said. “So I won’t run. But yes, I am afraid of him. Connor’s told me that Malfoy almost physically attacked him a number of times, and that he’s killed in battle. I won’t stop defending Connor.” She leaned her head against Connor’s neck, never taking her eyes off Harry. “It’s a small thing for him to decide that Connor’s girlfriend is just as annoying as he is, and to decide to hurt me.”

“And you think it would be simpler for both of you if I just stopped dating him,” Harry said, voice flat.

“Not only simpler, but the right thing to do.” Parvati was recovering now, as if her admission of fear had given her back her strength.

“Family is important, Harry. And you have so little family left now. Your parents were horrible to you. Your guardian is acting like a madman. Connor is lonely.”

“I am,” Connor volunteered. “Who doesn’t talk to their brother for two weeks because they’re angry at him over a fight with their boyfriend?”

“I can think of two people like that,” Harry said.

Connor flushed, but tried to persist. “We are brothers, Harry. We should spend more time together than we do. But I know Malfoy’s going to object to that, because he wants you all to himself.”

“If and when he objects, I’ll call him on it,” Harry said. “But I apologized to you yesterday for making mistakes, Connor, including not bringing this up sooner.” He faced Parvati. “I can promise that I’ll never let Draco hurt you. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to give up dating him, or that I’m going to hold him accountable for what his father did. Lucius Malfoy is one person. Draco Malfoy is another.”

“I don’t see how you can think he’s more important than your brother.” Parvati looked fretful, and she nodded at the ring on Harry’s hand that Draco had given him during their Walpurgis joining ritual. “Blood is more important than a circular piece of metal.”

Harry cocked his head. “Does that mean that you would choose Padma over Connor in a heartbeat, if you had to choose between them?”

Parvati froze. Connor took a step forward. “It’s not fair to ask her things like that,” he hissed. “I thought you were trying to keep the peace between us, Harry, not start more arguments.”

“I think everything should be out in the open, that’s all,” Harry told him, never taking his eyes off Parvati. “I want to understand what’s going on. And I’m most interested in what she has to say. Come on, Parvati. What do you think? Would you choose your sister over your boyfriend?”

Parvati unfroze. "I'll never have to make that choice," she hissed. "Padma is part of the Light, and she would never hurt me. She approves of Connor. She gets along with him. But your Malfoy might curse anyone he thinks is taking up too much of your time and imagination. That's what Dark wizards do."

"A family gathering, Harry? And you didn't invite me? I'm feeling left out."

Fuck. Harry stood, not coincidentally placing himself between Draco and Parvati as he did so. "Draco." He reached back, looping an arm around his partner's waist and dragging him to his side. "I don't think you've been formally introduced, though you certainly know each other. This is Parvati Patil. Connor's girlfriend."

Draco resisted the pull of Harry's arm. Harry darted a glance at his face. It was flushed in a way it usually only got after sex, and Draco seemed on the verge of drawing his wand. He gave a tight little nod.

"My condolences on your lack of taste," he told Parvati.

Parvati let out a little squeaking hiss; Harry was suddenly and absurdly sure her Animagus form would be a mongoose, rearing up to attack the nasty snake. "How dare you, Malfoy," she said. "And to think that I assumed your parents would have taught you manners. I suppose any Malfoy prefers torture to courtesy."

Harry felt the shift against his side as Draco's hand plunged into his pocket after his wand.

Harry spun, putting himself between Draco and Parvati again, but this time facing Draco and holding his wand hand so that he couldn't draw it. "No," he hissed into his ear. "Don't move it to curses." He looked over his shoulder at Parvati, sparing a hiss to calm down the Many snake, who appeared to have decided that the nervous owl was a forerunner of the kind of day he was going to have. "I think you should apologize," he told her.

Parvati tossed her hair, and Harry felt a surge of frustration. Connor's found a partner who's his match in stubbornness, too. "No," she said.

“What if I don’t want to? What if I think that Malfoy going for his wand only proves that, in fact, he knows nothing of manners, and proves all the things I said about him? That he would as soon curse me as look at me, and he’s going to hurt me someday, and he’s going to hurt your brother?”

Draco struggled, nearly managing to haul his wand hand from Harry’s hold; that Harry had only one hand didn’t make it any easier. He leaned forward, bracing himself against Draco, hip to hip, chest to chest. He would use his magic to bind Draco if he absolutely had to, but he would prefer to get through this without it. “He did it because you insulted him,” he said.

“And a normal person would have insulted me back, not reached for his wand,” said Parvati. Her eyes shone. “Don’t you agree, Connor?”

Harry looked at his brother, only to find Connor’s face pale. He’s probably thinking of Snape and Camellia, or what I talked to him about after his and Draco’s fight. Harry did not blame him.

He is stubborn, he is stupid sometimes, but he can see what’s in front of his face.

“Parvati,” Connor began in a low, troubled voice.

Draco moved so fast that Harry had no time to react, stepping back and making Harry stagger. Then his hand was free, and he whipped it out of his pocket, his wand aimed directly at Parvati.

Harry said, even as his magic reared up around him in the form of vine-green snakes, “Stop it right fucking now, Draco.”

Draco’s mouth clamped shut after the first syllable of a spell; Harry wasn’t sure which one it had been. He stared at Harry. Harry snarled at him, and the snakes writhed around his body, awaiting a command to attack.

Draco went on staring. Harry knew that he recognized the snakes as an extreme manifestation of anger. He must be wondering what in the world he could have done to make that fury be directed at him.

Harry turned, the snakes coiling around his arms and neck. Parvati had gone silent, eyes wide and face almost white. Connor was the only one there who seemed capable of looking at him and not cowering or flinching.

I don't want to make them afraid. I don't. I don't. Harry swallowed several times, and some of the magic drained away, the snakes losing form and lapsing into a bright green glow around his body. He shook his head. I should not have done that. I should not have frightened them. He dragged his hand through his hair, aware it was shaking. He thought of hiding it, then realized it might help the point he wanted to make. He held it out, and let them see his wrist tremble.

"I don't like getting angry," he said. "I'm not interested in keeping track from moment to moment of who's trying to pull whom apart, or what all the old wounds are." He sent a hard glance at Parvati, hoping she would understand his reference to Lucius Malfoy. "The same thing I said yesterday remains true. I'm going to keep talking to you both. I still love you, Connor, and I still want to welcome you into my company, Parvati, even if we can't be best friends. But I'll have to change my manner of dealing with you." He swallowed the other words he wanted to say: I thought I was dealing with adults. I see I was wrong. That would only escalate things unnecessarily. He had already gone too far by showing the snakes. Balance had to be maintained, if at all possible. "And both of you will have to get used to Draco."

"But he would have cursed me," Parvati pointed out.

Harry kept himself from yelling by a serious effort that made him feel as if he were choking. If he gave the reply he wanted, then Connor would only get upset with him again, and they would have another fight on their hands. Harry imagined his mind as the serene silver surface of an Occlumency pool, and made it be so. He had never been so grateful to Snape for teaching him self-control as he was now.

"Because of what you said," he replied, calmly, when he was sure that his voice would not shake or hint at unguessed-of depths of

anger. "I won't go into who started this. But insulting words are just as dangerous as curses, in this kind of situation. And given that I know you're afraid of Dark Arts from him, I don't know why you would give him a reason to want to curse you."

"I was showing you his true colors," Parvati said.

Draco uttered a low, squalling sound of outrage. Harry stepped back until his back was pressed to Draco's chest, and silently promised himself that if Draco reached for his wand again, he would find his hand full of something disgusting.

"I know him," said Harry quietly. "You don't. The problem has been that you don't know him well enough, and neither does Connor, and neither of us know you. So. I'd like to propose having a few weekly conversations until we do know each other well enough."

Parvati shook her head, frowning. "You have to schedule Connor into your life, Harry? I find that disappointing."

"I find everything about you—" Draco started.

Harry squeezed his wrist, and he stopped. "No, I have to schedule both of you," he said, and that seemed to make Parvati stop and think. "This is the way I should handle it, I think. I'm vates. I won't abandon Draco, and I don't want to abandon either one of you. Yes, it's artificial, not spontaneous, but we've seen what spontaneous conversations between us are like now. I don't want anyone hurt."

"But you want to protect your boyfriend more than you want to protect us," Parvati probed.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Don't you want to protect Connor more than you want to protect me?"

Parvati scowled and kept silent. Harry wondered how much of that had to do with the fact that Connor was curled around her shoulder, whispering into her ear.

“So.” Harry gave a tight nod. “I know for a fact that all four of us are free on Thursday evenings. Would that be acceptable? Thursday evening at seven-o’clock, in the Room of Requirement?”

Parvati and Connor exchanged glances. Then Parvati nodded, and Connor said, “We could make that work, I think.”

Harry let a little of the iron bands of his self-control fall away. “Good. We’ll have one conversation, and try to get through it without insults, or curses, or screaming of any kind. Does that sound like an acceptable goal?”

Again, they both nodded. Parvati’s face remained pale, and Harry hoped that he might have reached her with the comment about Connor, or the one about Padma, or the one about her and her twin learning the Dark Arts. She wasn’t a complete hypocrite. He could coax her into reasonableness, he hoped.

“Good,” said Harry, and held Draco back until both of them were inside Hogwarts and out of sight. Then he turned to face his boyfriend.

“That bloody hurt,” Draco complained, wringing his wrist where Harry had gripped it.

“Good,” said Harry, and then swallowed. No. His voice wanted to be low and savage with Draco, but that wouldn’t do any good. My anger just isn’t productive, not with this. “Draco, I want this to work. I agree that she was wrong to insult you. But what were you thinking, flinging a curse? You remember what McGonagall said about students hexing other students. She would consider them traitors.”

“I considered,” Draco said stiffly, “that she has no right to say that kind of thing. I was going to teach her a lesson, that’s all.”

Harry closed his eyes and pushed up his glasses. “She doesn’t,” he said. “But you didn’t have the right to throw a curse either, Draco.”

“You can’t be on both our sides at the same time, Harry,” Draco said, sounding hurt. “That’s not possible.”

"It is when I'm more interested in solving the problem than placing blame," said Harry, and again swallowed back more anger, like bile. "I want this to work, Draco. I'm willing to work my arse off so that it can. Please don't spoil it."

Draco just looked away from him.

Harry breathed out gently, and counted to three in Mermish. That ought to be enough. "I don't really care who started it, not any more," he said. "I don't really care about what might happen in the future. I only care about what will. And one of the best ways to alter that is to attack those problems at their roots." And to be patient. I might want to tell them off for being petulant children, but that would only cause more problems. And I would be excluding myself from blame, in that case. My silent treatment of Connor played an enormous part in this. "Conversations between us are the only way I can think of to get us talking, rather than flinging insults or hexes."

"She wants you and I to stop dating," said Draco. "I think she won't give up."

"Wait until Thursday, and see if she still says that," Harry said.

Draco turned to go back into the castle. Harry followed a few paces behind him, rubbing at his brow. He had a headache that had nothing to do with his scar, or the odd dreams he'd been having lately. He was angry at everyone, including himself, but anger that took the form of blame wouldn't help. So he would keep it to himself.

But he wasn't sure even that would help. Maybe expressing open anger with Connor would impress the seriousness of the situation on him. Maybe he was being remiss in not scolding Parvati, in not being more openly annoyed at Draco.

But he couldn't be sure, especially since every time he got angry, he made the situation worse. So accepting the consequences of what he had done so far, and insisting on rationality rather than anger at all, from anyone, seemed like the best thing, the only way to allow the clash of free wills.

A particularly vicious bolt of pain shot up from his jaw. Carefully, Harry unclenched his teeth. Harry eyed Wayhouse's wooden wall. "Be still," he said.

The wall grew a mouth, a pair of large lips blue as if with cold, that pouted at him. Then a tongue popped out, and the wall blew him a raspberry.

"Stupid house," Harry muttered. A pair of eyes grew above the mouth and the tongue and crossed at him, then vanished back into the wood. But when Harry listened, the wards held. So Wayhouse had decided to shelter both him and Kieran until morning. Harry nodded.

He turned to Kieran, who hovered anxiously behind him. "We'll do this each night of the full moon," he said. "I'm surprised that your last fellow hunter didn't want to shelter with you, however."

Kieran gave a quick, nervous smile. He was a tall man with fierce brown eyes whom Harry supposed might have been handsome once, before fear had charred him hollow. "He has family in France," Kieran responded. "He took refuge there. He doesn't trust you to protect him." He paused, hands twisting together. "Thank you for doing this," he whispered. "I know you don't like me."

Harry shrugged. "I don't like Loki's vengeance even more," he said. I'm in the same room with a murderer, but when has that ever been new? He wasn't betraying the pack, either, because Loki wasn't part of the pack. Both Camellia and Remus had tried to convince Harry that interfering in Loki's vengeance was a bad idea, but Camellia's arguments consisted only in warning him that Loki couldn't be stopped—which Harry thought was nonsense, as long as Wayhouse's wards held—and Remus's had escalated into a shouting match before long, because he said Harry was betraying all werewolves by associating with a hunter in the first place. He hadn't seemed interested in the argument that Loki's vengeance would make things worse for all the werewolves in Britain.

Between the shouting match and the two conversations with Draco, Connor, and Parvati between the eighteenth and now, Harry's head

felt as if it were about to split open. He'd become an expert in burying his temper, and not just in Occlumency pools. He knew numbers in Mermish up to a hundred now; he'd had to learn them for the times when he and Draco went back to their bedroom and lay in rigid silence, Draco upset with him for conceding anything to Connor and Parvati, Harry upset with himself for being upset.

Protecting Kieran was almost a relief. Wayhouse's wards were incredibly strong, tied to both the house itself and the determination of the Black heir. Harry was not going to let Loki kill anybody tonight, so that was no problem.

He had not asked anyone to come with him, because they either had good reasons not to—asking other werewolves to side against Loki was madness, and most of his allies were busy watching the London packs or accomplishing the tasks Harry had asked them to do—or they could do nothing that Harry's magic and wards couldn't. Connor and Draco would both have been willing to accompany him. Harry didn't want them there. If it came down to a duel against Loki, which Harry didn't believe it would, they weren't strong enough to battle a werewolf who had been a pack leader, and would only make distractions for Harry's attention. And if it came down to sitting in Wayhouse behind wards all night, Harry would rather not share conversations with one of them about the other.

Having them together in the same place all night was not even to be considered.

But they had made some progress. Harry had to admit that. It might cost him headaches, but he had kept the paths of conversation between all four of them open and moving, and forced all of them to reconsider their assumptions, including Parvati's assumption that Harry didn't value Connor enough because he wouldn't spend every minute with him and Draco's assumption that Parvati's fear of him was based on nothing but hearsay. They would get there in the end. Harry reminded himself of that whenever he was sure that these conversations would last for years and do nothing. Two only so far. He could do more.

“Harry?”

Harry looked up in surprise; he'd almost forgotten about Kieran. He shook his head. “You promised me that you would tell me something about the Department’s politics concerning werewolves if I protected you,” he said. “So, tell me.”

Kieran nodded and took a seat in one of the chairs Harry had provided. This room had once been a kitchen, and it was on the second floor of Wayhouse. Harry thought it was as good a place as any to wait out Loki’s arrival and useless dashing of himself against the wards. “The Department plans to collar all werewolves soon,” he said.

Harry snorted. “They already said that would happen.”

Kieran shook his head. “No, they just said that all werewolves had to wear collars, by law. They’re smart enough to know that most of the werewolves in Britain aren’t registered, and there’s no way they could make them register.” Kieran paused, licking his lips. “Except now, they’ve found a way to make that not matter.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Tell me.”

Kieran shrank back in his chair, intimidated. Harry tried to make his face relax. Kieran stuttered, but got back on track. “Th—they plan to send out the werewolf tracking spell across Britain, in a pulse that will surround them and linger. So anyone who’s a werewolf, whether or not they’re registered, will be instantly identifiable. The ones who come in of their own free will have to wear collars and remain under the Ministry’s eye. Those who have to be dragged in will take the collar, but be put into Tullianum.”

“Fuck,” Harry breathed.

“Most of the werewolves Loki turned in his attack on the Department are there already,” Kieran added. “The Ministry declared that they wouldn’t be able to keep themselves safe enough, and the walls and wards of Tullianum will do it for them.”

Harry closed his eyes. "So that's why none of them have answered my letters."

Kieran swallowed, an audible click in his throat. "The Ministry had no idea what to do with forty new werewolves. They caged them up and hoped for the best."

"Do they have Wolfsbane?" Harry asked, opening his eyes.

Kieran shook his head. "A few do, but most of them couldn't afford it."

Harry winced, remembering Hawthorn's account of what had happened during her one transformation, the first after Fenrir Greyback's bite, when she went without Wolfsbane. And the first transformation's always the worst, and it always kills some of the newly-bitten. Fuck.

"If they hate them so much, why are they capturing and collaring them?" he asked. "Why not just kill them?"

"Because the Unspeakables want to use them," Kieran whispered, as if the walls had grown ears.

Harry felt his heart stop.

"Why?" he breathed. "For what?"

"I don't know." Kieran shook his head wildly, but the words spilled forth from him as if he were glad to give them up at last. "When I was a hunter, they told us to capture a few werewolves if we could in the attack on Loki's pack. We didn't manage it, though; we just killed those two. But there was a family whose son had just been turned. It was his first change, and they drugged him with some sort of incredibly strong potion. It didn't put him to sleep, or calm his mind, but it made him docile enough that the Unspeakables could handle him. I know they took him down into the Department of Mysteries. I don't know what happened after that. But if they have a lot of werewolves in Tullianum, they can take them conveniently, and no one will really notice or care."

Harry curled his fingers around the arm of his chair. Both Tullianum and the Department of Mysteries were far beneath the rest of the Ministry. He wondered how short a distance it was between them, really.

“And you swear that you have no idea what they’re doing?” he demanded of Kieran.

Kieran shook his head again. “No. That I heard that much at all was the result of people gossiping who shouldn’t have been. Felicia—” He swallowed, and Harry told himself to remember that he was talking to a man who had seen many of his comrades turned into werewolves and another ripped apart, and told that his fate on the next full moon would be Felicia’s. “Felicia had a relative connected to the Department of Mysteries. He passed the rumors along to her, and she told me. And for all I know, they may be wrong.”

Harry half-lidded his eyes and fought to control his breathing. The urge to do something to get the werewolves out of Tullianum, to brew the cure for lycanthropy, to find out what had happened to the young werewolf captured during July’s full moon, was struggling in him. He wanted to push to his feet and go flying out through the door of Wayhouse. He felt as if he were useless if he weren’t doing something. He had spent too much time in the last few weeks on his bonds with Draco, Connor, Parvati, and Snape. How could he have?

He put the emotions back under the serene surface of his mind again. He could do this. He could stay here and protect Kieran, his duty for the night. He opened his eyes, and asked, “Was there anything else you could tell me?”

“Well, some older Department policies, but they’ve changed now, with so much of our strength turned into werewolves,” said Kieran fretfully. “They mostly concerned—”

Loki howled.

Harry knew in a moment who it must be. The howl rang through the wards, though they should have been able to hear nothing from outside—feel Loki’s impact on them, perhaps—and echoed in his

ears. His mind flashed with images of darkened nights around campfires, his ancestors crouching and shivering in fear while howling creatures prowled just beyond the flames and stared with red eyes and cried out their hunger.

He heard a strangled sob, and smelled piss, and knew Kieran had just wet himself. Harry turned to face the wards, ready to put his own strength behind them if it were needed. He had linked chains of Shield Charms up already. He had trusted to the combination to keep them safe.

Camellia's words echoed in his mind again. You can't stop him or turn him aside, Wild. Not a werewolf on the vengeance-path. Please, please don't try. You have no idea what will happen if you do.

And there was the fact that Loki had crashed into a Department of werewolf hunters, turned forty of them, torn apart one, and escaped.

But Harry told himself not to be ridiculous. None of the Department hunters had been Lord-level wizards, and they hadn't been expecting the attack; they had been getting ready to go hunt the London packs. He knew what was coming. He—

Wayhouse shook. Harry staggered. He felt as though he'd just met a score of charging knights. The howl came again, louder and closer and from every corner of the sky this time, like thunder.

Kieran was screaming mindlessly. Harry shook his head and called his magic, pouring it into the wards, weaving more chains of Shield Charms, slightly reassured as more and more moments passed, and nothing happened.

Then he felt Loki break the wards.

It should not have been possible. But Wayhouse was wailing in anguish, and Harry knew the feeling of magic failing to stop an assault; he knew it from countless hours of practice as a child, when pain curses would make it through his shields, and from the Quidditch pitch in his first year, when Bellatrix Lestrange had thrown curses so strong they cracked his wandless Protego. These wards parted, and

slid in jagged edges like the broken glass of a window pane around Loki's body. He was within them, padding forward.

Kieran moaned. The sound couldn't cover the noise of great claws ripping through a wooden door.

"Stay here!" Harry yelled at Kieran, though he doubted he needed to give the warning, and stepped out of the kitchen, shutting and locking the door firmly behind him. Now he could hear the sound even more clearly, rending and tearing from downstairs. Harry took a deep breath and wrapped his magic around him in a tight ball.

Gloriana Griffinsnest hadn't been able to tell him that much about a werewolf hunting for vengeance because of his mate's murder. She had said that she'd heard tales about no one being able to stop such a werewolf, but she didn't believe them. Why should she? Kill a werewolf, and they were dead.

Harry touched the silver knife hanging from his belt. He hoped he wouldn't have to use it. He would kill Loki if he must, but he would prefer this night pass with no loss of life.

The next howl knocked knickknacks juddering from their shelves. Harry saw a frightened face form in the wall, and knew Wayhouse itself was on the verge of panic. He whispered soothing words, while he walked slowly down the stairs and faced the front door. The shimmer of wards and Shield Charms between him and it was almost a solid wall. He could see, blurred and dizzy as if moving underwater, the black, hooked nails and the edge of the paw, and then came a glimpse of a furred shoulder, shoving hard.

The door did not so much break as disintegrate. And then Loki stood there, staring at Harry.

Harry had never seen him in werewolf form. He understood now why Camellia had told him Loki's "surname," on the rare occasions he chose to use it, was Palefire. His coat was white, the hardly-gold color of his hair, and thick as a snowdrift. The light sent up a faint halo around it. His amber eyes glowed like suns from the middle of a

head that came up to Harry's shoulder, bigger than any other werewolf he had ever seen.

Harry knew from the shine in those eyes that Loki had taken Wolfsbane, or had otherwise arranged to have his intelligence unfettered. He held up the silver knife in silent warning, and reared his own magic. Black snakes unfolded around him, hissing.

Loki opened his mouth. The howl that came from it shook the world.

Then he jumped at Harry.

He passed through the wards and Shield Charms like water; they melted and rippled around his body. Harry dropped to one knee so as not to meet the full weight of that leap and aimed the silver knife so that Loki should impale himself on it.

But a werewolf was not a wolf; Remus had told him that more than once. Loki snapped his body sideways in midair, bending his belly away from the knife; it carved through some of his fur, but did no worse damage. He landed with a thump that made Wayhouse tremble again, shook his fur as if shaking off water, and turned towards the stairs.

Harry shouted and threw the silver knife straight at him. Loki ducked, bowing his head to his paws, and it went over him and rang off the wall. He placed one paw on the bottom step.

Harry, frantic now, opened his absorbere gift. He would have to make sure that he didn't swallow Wayhouse's magic along with Loki's, but if spells and wards weren't going to stop him, draining his magic would have to.

What he swallowed made him gag. It wasn't like the foul, tainted magic of Voldemort and the Death Eaters; it was solid instead, so that Harry couldn't absorb it. He tried, and tried, and it was like choking on a stone each time. He saw Loki turn his head, glancing at him with amber eyes full of pity, and then he rose up the stairs like an avalanche in reverse, going for Kieran.

Harry lunged again, this time summoning magic to flood his muscles. He would grab Loki and wrestle him to the ground if he had to.

Jaws closed on his leg and spun him around. Harry fell, gasping. Looking up, he saw a shimmering, silvery shape hovering over him, a werewolf as pale as Loki.

Gudrun.

Gloriana hadn't mentioned that the ghosts of the murdered werewolves hunted beside their mates. Harry wondered bitterly if it happened all the time, or if it was just the magic's way of making sure he couldn't get in the way and interfere tonight.

Frantic, he tried to call on the rage that had once made him will Fenrir Greyback out of existence. But panic didn't provide the same kind of anger that fear for Draco's life had. The ghost of Gudrun simply looked at him, and then tucked her tail to her belly and flew towards the stairs.

Harry remembered where his real battle lay then, and called out, "Ardesco!"

Loki's fur smoked, and then stopped. Harry tried three more spells, casting them so fast he could hardly tell them apart. None of them worked. They melted and splashed against Loki, exactly as the wards and the Shield Charms had. Loki had reached the top of the staircase.

Camellia's words came back again, damning. You can't stop him or turn him aside, Wild.

Harry had never imagined that that meant he just wouldn't be able to.

Please, he thought, dropping Wayhouse's wards so that he could Apparate into the kitchen. Please, don't let him bite Kieran.

He appeared between Loki and Kieran, crouching on the floor, using his body as a shield. Loki padded forward a few steps and stopped, amber eyes filled with emotions Harry couldn't understand.

"Please," Harry whispered. Helplessness beat at his ribs like wings. The only time he had ever felt this bad was when he lay strapped on an altar stone in a graveyard, his wandless magic bound inside his body by the power of Midsummer, and watched Fenrir Greyback and his consort devour a child. "Please, please, do not. I know you can understand me, Loki. Please, give it up. Your people's future may depend on it. Every bite you give sends the wizarding world further into the depths of madness and terror. And if that doesn't convince you, I promised to protect Kieran. Please. Please."

A movement off to the side made Harry look up. The ghost of Gudrun hovered there, watching him. She had been beautiful, as pale as her mate, with large, intelligent eyes and long legs that made her body look more graceful than an ordinary wolf's, instead of monstrous.

"Please," Harry told her.

She looked down at him, amber bleeding into her eyes, taking over from the silver color of ghosts. She bowed her head, and Harry heard a cold, distant whine, a sound that could have come from the Thorn Bitch's briars rubbing together.

He felt wind pass over his head.

Loki leaped and came down precisely behind Harry, pinning Kieran to the floor and tearing him away. Kieran screamed in utter terror, and then Loki raked up with his front legs and down with his back ones, ripping open Kieran's chest and disemboweling him in the same movement.

Harry nearly vomited, not from the smell but from the powerlessness. He reached out with his magic and simply flung it at Loki, not bothering to shape it into spells, just wanting this to stop.

The magic parted around Loki. He moved his hind legs again, and blood sprayed Harry's face and glasses, blinding him and dripping into his mouth. He spat, pulling his glasses off, trying to see what was happening, cursing the lack of a left hand.

He blinked his eyelashes rapidly to free them of caked gore. When he could see, he knew he was too late. Loki had crushed Kieran's skull in his jaws and ripped his head free of his neck.

I promised to protect him. And I could not.

The pain of his failure scooped into Harry like his own Exsculpo spell, leaving him hollow. He found himself leaning forward, hand out, and did not even know what he was reaching for. He knew his body shook with sobs, though, sobs of unleashed mourning.

Loki bit down, and rent Kieran's body into two pieces. Harry wondered if he would ever be able to see a werewolf's strength as beautiful again, or only as horrific.

Loki stepped delicately away then, and turned to face him. Harry knelt there, staring at him. He knew Loki could tear him apart, or make him into a werewolf, and thanks to the protection Loki had gained by swearing himself to this vengeance-path, Harry wouldn't be able to stop him.

He cannot be stopped. He cannot be turned aside.

Gleaming amber eyes watched him from a field of blood and snow, and then Loki slipped past him and padded down the stairs. Harry felt him pass through the remains of Wayhouse's broken door, and then the broken wards. The ghost of Gudrun lingered for a moment, and Harry sensed the wet touch of a tongue to his cheek.

Then they were gone, and he was alone with his frightened, whimpering house and the broken body of the man he had promised to protect.

Harry folded his arms on his knees and bowed his head into them. Tears made slow progress against the blood on his cheeks. His shoulders shook with his sobbing. Blame boiled in his stomach until he felt as though he'd swallowed poison.

For a moment, he wanted, with a simplicity and clarity he hadn't felt since he'd mercy-killed the children outside Hogwarts, to die. There were some mistakes that could not be forgiven.

Then he took a few deep breaths and drove the emotions back into the places they belonged. If they acted as lashes on his soul, to drive him out of inactivity and into doing something about this, then he could use them. If not, then he had no time for them. This was battle, and he couldn't pause to attend to his own wounds.

He rose to his feet, and, waving his hand, gathered the broken bits of Kieran's body back together. Then he prepared to repair Wayhouse's wards. When that was done, he would make a firecall to the Ministry, trying any and all Departments until he found a Floo that was open—or he would wait until morning, if none of them were. He knew from Kieran's last name that he'd relatives at the Ministry at one point. If none worked there now, the Ministry would at least know how to contact them.

His balance wavered for a moment, when he saw how many scraps of flesh Loki had torn loose from Kieran's body, but he could not afford to fall, so he did not.

Harry returned to Hogwarts just after noon the next day. It had taken him that long to locate Kieran's relatives—he no longer had anyone working at the Ministry—and turn the body over to them. It had been a cousin who came to collect him, Jenna. Her shock and her slowly widening eyes and her vomiting had been no less than what Harry expected. He had asked if she wanted to know anything else about her cousin's death, but she only shook her head and turned away from him. He could not blame her for that.

A few Ministry officials had acted as if they would like to interrogate him, but they couldn't figure out what to do or who should do it. After all, Harry had been protecting Kieran, by his own story. And the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts was in limbo at the moment, due to the destruction of so many of its members. This was only a late casualty.

In the end, after a confused hour in which Harry was shuttled between Amelia Bones's office and one in the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, he was released to go home.

He Apparated to the edge of the Hogwarts wards, on the road to Hogsmeade, and used the walk to get used to the knife-wound that seemed to have taken over his soul. No, it felt more like a sword-cut, he decided. Horror was part of it, but so was guilt, and so was his half-panicked determination to make sure this never happened again.

He had learned his lesson after the mercy-killing; Vera had taught him better. He would not tumble into depression, not when other people were depending on him. He had wrought this situation, and while looking back on it and lamenting it would satisfy one part of him, it did nothing in the long run. Eventually, he would make the wound stop feeling like a sword-cut and make it into another whip in his soul, driving him forward so that he would not collapse.

Harry wasn't sure what he used to keep on his feet long enough to reach the entrance hall: the lessons learned in the Sanctuary, Lily's training, his own innate stubbornness. Whatever it was, it worked. He was breathing more easily by then, and felt ready to face others. He had used the communication spell to let Draco, Connor, Joseph, McGonagall, and others know he was well, and, briefly, what had happened. It helped that he'd had the chance to cleanse himself of gore. That helped a great deal.

He lifted his gaze as a shadow moved in front of him. It was McGonagall who came to meet him, her face ashen as he had never seen it before. She clutched the Daily Prophet in her hand.

"Mr. Pott—Harry," she said. "I told the others to stay where they were. I thought you should hear this from me."

"What is it?" Harry asked quietly. He hadn't had time to glance at the newspaper this morning. He wondered if they were reporting Kieran's murder and him as an accomplice in it. Willoughby might have the chance to see me on trial after all.

McGonagall took a deep breath and stood straight as a blade. It struck Harry, for no apparent reason, that this was the way she might have looked reporting to Dumbledore in the First War.

“They’ve declared open hunting season on werewolves,” she said. “Any of them can be killed without penalty, provided that the killer can confirm they’re werewolves afterwards. And they’ve arrested Hawthorn Parkinson.”

Chapter Twenty-Three: At Daggers Drawn

The news made Harry want to collapse. But he knew he couldn't. For one thing, if he did, he probably wouldn't be able to get back up again. And even if he managed it, then other people would try to make him lie still and—and rest, or something. He couldn't do that.

He turned the shock into another whip, driving him on. He fastened his eyes on McGonagall's face and said, "And we don't know anything about who betrayed her?"

McGonagall shook her head. "Only that the Aurors came and arrested her early this morning. She was taken to Tullianum under suspicion of being a werewolf. Ownership of the Parkinson estates was stripped from her." Then she pursed her lips, making her look more like the stern Professor he was accustomed to, and held out the paper. "This is what it said."

Harry took the paper and studied it. But McGonagall had already told him all the essentials; the rest was just the usual fluff that the Prophet tucked around the Ministry's declarations to make them seem less blatant than they really were. "Safety of the public" mingled with "best way to handle them" and "done for the rights of werewolves as well as others" in his eyes. Harry blinked, and realized the words were dangerously near to blurring and swimming.

No.

He nodded and handed the Prophet back to McGonagall. "I'll go and speak to Scrimgeour about this," he said.

A new shadow moved across McGonagall's face. "Are you sure that is wise, Harry?" she asked. "The arrest is new, and the Minister may be unable to do anything about this until the emotions in the Ministry calm somewhat. In a day, perhaps two—"

"No." Harry shook his head. "From this point forward, it's only going to get worse." He felt weariness push at him like a tide, but he ignored it. He had hoped to avoid this. He had hoped matters wouldn't come to this head. But they had, and unless he managed to persuade

Scrimgeour to move against the edict right away—which he didn't expect to happen—then he was headed for a course of open rebellion against the Ministry. He had tried, and others had tried, but it wasn't enough. "They've passed a law making werewolves unsafe everywhere, Madam. It's not going to die in a day or two. It'll build from this point forward, and if no one does anything to oppose them, because they want to wait and see what happens, or because they're afraid, then the Ministry will pass more laws against werewolves. And who knows who it'll be next? Dark wizards, maybe. There were a few laws like that on the books already."

"They will not pass laws like that, Harry," McGonagall whispered, as if she wanted to reassure him. "Dark wizards are still too much a part of the population, and too in control even now. There are small numbers of werewolves compared to Dark wizards."

"But werewolves can make more of themselves, fast," said Harry flatly. "And there are still two nights of the full moon left, during which werewolves can transform and wreak all sorts of havoc." He stared directly into her eyes. "Madam, do you think rationality is involved here? I don't."

McGonagall looked away from him. Harry could feel her own fear and determination as if she were speaking into his thoughts. She was concerned for her school, worried about what would happen to her students if she tried to shelter werewolves or take a side in this conflict.

Harry gripped and squeezed her arm. "I'm not asking you to take my side," he said. "You have responsibilities that I don't. What I'm doing is easier, actually, because I don't have hundreds of young wizards, and their parents, depending on me. You can step back, Madam, and tell anyone who asks that I'm not doing this with your good grace or your permission."

"You are still one of my students, Harry," McGonagall said, pulling herself upright like an offended cat, and Harry realized he'd mistaken the source of her concern.

It warmed a few of the icy whips he had to worry about now. Harry smiled at her. "Thank you, Madam, but from this point forward, I don't want you to worry about that. I don't think I'll be coming back to Hogwarts for a good while, if ever."

"Harry—"

He gently shook his head at her and held out his hand. "Pack Harry's things," he said clearly. "Accio."

Then he had to wait while the charms packed his trunk and flew it to him. Harry shrank the trunk when it got there and tucked it into his robe pocket. The only thing he had left was the Firebolt, which waited for him in the Quidditch shed.

"I hope the Slytherin team can find another Seeker in time," he told McGonagall. "No offense to your House, but I still want mine to win the Cup."

McGonagall went on staring at him.

"And take good care of Snape," Harry added, starting to turn on his heel.

"Wait. Harry—wait." McGonagall spoke as if the words had been torn out of her. "You aren't asking anyone to go with you?"

Harry glanced back at her over his shoulder. "There are a few people I'll ask to join me, if what I fully expect happens and the Minister can't help me," he said calmly. "But it has to be a choice, and I want them to have time to think about it, not be swept away in immediate outrage over Hawthorn's arrest and the announcement of the hunt. It's not going to be easy, and I don't think some of my allies, like Snape, can manage it at all. For me, there's not a choice." He lifted his left arm, shaking back the sleeve to show her the scar of the formal family oath he'd made with the Parkinsons. The scar was burning and tingling. "It's not just the promise I made to help the werewolves that drives this forward. It's the promise I made to the Parkinsons. Hawthorn is the last member of her family left alive." Other than Falco Parkinson, Harry supposed, but he didn't think that

counted, or the old wizard wouldn't have been able to act against him. Besides, the oath hadn't affected Henrietta when he first knew her, even though she was part of the Bulstrode family. "I'm going."

"Surely, Mr. Malfoy, your brother—" said McGonagall, still sounding as if someone had slammed her over the head with a Beater's bat.

"I'll speak with them later," said Harry quietly. "As I said, I don't want them pulled along by runaway emotions." And I want them to have time to think about this and what it really means. Being my brother and my lover, even being my allies, is one thing. Joining me in a rebellion is quite another.

He nodded one more time to McGonagall, and then turned and began walking back towards the Hogsmeade road, with only a short stopover at the Quidditch shed. Meanwhile, his mind calmly listed the places he could go for sanctuary, and the best choices among them.

His allies' houses were out, of course, until he found out how much they wanted to be involved in this; Hawthorn was the only one he could be sure of on that count, and the Garden would be swarming with Aurors, and probably Unspeakables. The Black houses held the pack, and Harry suspected Shield of the Granian, if they had received information from Falco and were working with the Unspeakables, might already have passed that tidbit along. They would wait a short time before moving, since invading the estates of a prominent pureblood family wouldn't look good even now, but surely no more than a few days.

So he needed a place that would shelter both him and the pack, and he needed it ready in no more than a few days' time.

Harry felt a smile pull at his mouth. There was only one choice, really.

The emotions he felt had changed, he thought. Now they felt less like whips driving him forward, and more like a wind tugging him on, pointing the way towards his ultimate goal.

He reached the outer limit of the wards, and Apparated, the hills of Woodhouse clear in his mind.

Harry arrived at the Ministry's front entrance without fanfare, but also without attempting to hide. He was waiting to see what would happen when he approached. Did he still have any allies in the Ministry? He didn't know, at this point.

His magic lapped around him, thick washing waves of it that made the checkpoint wizard stare at him. Harry raised an eyebrow, pointing out the utter folly of asking for a wand. The checkpoint wizard nodded quickly and let him through.

Harry walked to the lifts that would take him to Scrimgeour's office, all the while reaching out with his magical senses, delving deeper into the stones of the Ministry than he had ever done before. When he sensed the faint traces of buried spells, he murmured the incantation that Millicent had taught him once upon a long time ago. "Aspectus Lyncis."

The world around him turned almost white with radiance. Harry nodded slowly. When he squinted through the radiance, he could make out the buried traces of the Unspeakables' wards. They were not really undetectable, but they were made of spells not usually used for defensive purposes, and so twisted on one another that Harry thought they would hurt the eyes of most wizards looking, and buried so deep that most people wouldn't find them.

Harry gave a tight little smile. The wards ran everywhere, and vibrated with sound, bringing it to some central place below the rest of the Ministry. He supposed the Unspeakables sat there in the middle of their web and listened, and there really was nothing they didn't hear.

Let them listen all they want, he thought, as he rode in a lift to the top of the Ministry, and then stepped out and into the corridor that led to Scrimgeour's office. Let their ears ring. I'm not hiding.

He recognized neither Auror on the door to Scrimgeour's office, and wondered if that meant Wilmot had already been captured. McGonagall hadn't mentioned the Department's plan to send out the werewolf-tracking spell and surround every lycanthrope in Britain with

a blue fog. Perhaps they were waiting to do it until the full moon had passed, or perhaps the declaration of the hunting season had replaced Kieran's old information.

Harry knew he would have to be prepared to react when the information came along. He also knew that he could probably know just by going to Amelia Bones's office and using Legilimency on her.

But he didn't want to. He was going to war like a vates, not otherwise.

The two Aurors on the door got more and more nervous as they watched him come closer. Harry stopped in front of them and surveyed them. Both men, both ordinary in appearance, one with slightly nicer robes, perhaps a pureblood. He wouldn't want to kill them.

"I need to see the Minister," he said, and let a snake of golden light curl around his shoulders. It didn't strike, it just watched them, but one of the men began sweating, and Harry suspected he'd stumbled into a phobia. "Now."

"He's with other people at the moment," said the Auror with slightly finer robes. The other one watched the snake and made a faint gargling noise that might indicate his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth.

"What kind of other people?" Harry asked.

He found out in a moment, though, because either the Minister hadn't set up the wards that blocked sound or the shouting had grown too loud for them. And, what was more, he knew the voice doing the shouting.

"—not close! I don't care! I know you have your reasons, Minister, but I have mine, and I can't do this any more! It just—it isn't what being an Auror is about! This is the last straw! And for you to sit here and say that you won't do anything about the hunting season, that you can't do anything—" The shouter stopped and audibly drew in her breath, but then continued in a voice that sounded no softer than before. "Then you will be pleased to accept my resignation."

The Aurors moved out of the way like a pair of well-trained dancers as someone flung the door open. Out stepped Nymphadora Tonks, her hair flaming red with orange streaks, her eyes wide and blue and bright as lightning with emotion.

She caught sight of Harry, and stopped. She blinked a bit, then said, "Oh. Erm. I just joined your rebellion."

Harry smiled in spite of himself and held out his hand. "I know. I heard," he said.

"Well, they were going to sack me anyway for shouting at the Minister, weren't they?" Tonks muttered, and stepped forward to clasp his wrist. She stumbled on the way, but steadied herself against the doorframe, never taking her eyes off Harry. "So, when do we leave?"

"Right after I talk to Scrimgeour," Harry said.

Tonks scowled, transformed in a moment from bumbling girl to someone far more dangerous. "He's insufferable, Harry. It's not going to do any good."

"I've got to try," said Harry, and then remembered the wards that ran everywhere, and the fact that a few minutes of waiting in the hallway for him could put Tonks in danger. He laid his hand on her arm and concentrated, closing his eyes. The Imperturbable Charm leaked into her skin and surrounded her with a glowing cage of purple light.

Harry opened his eyes to see her poking at it, and explained, "So that no enemies can touch you while I'm gone."

Tonks swallowed, and then her face hardened, and Harry suspected he was seeing the battle-trained Auror. "Right," she said, and stepped aside. Harry went into the office, and shut the door behind him with a gentle gust of wind.

Scrimgeour sat at his desk. Percy sat at his, behind the ward that probably protected him from the notice of most people, his hand clutching his wand and a hostile expression on his face. Harry eyed

him sideways and shook his head. He would be sorry to alienate Percy, but there was no help for it, not if Scrimgeour was going to present a public face supporting the hunting season and Percy was going to stand by him.

“Minister,” Harry said, crossing his arms and inclining his head. “You know why I’m here.”

Scrimgeour flicked one eye towards the walls. Harry snorted. So he knows about the wards, and he’s afraid to say anything in front of the Unspeakables? Well, I’m not. And the best way is to destroy their advantage of secrecy. He glanced at the walls, found the Unspeakables’ listening wards shining in the stones, and opened up the absorbere gift. The magic ran down his gullet, and the wards vanished.

“Your Unspeakables have betrayed you,” he told Scrimgeour bluntly. “They want werewolves captured and brought to Tullianum to use for experiments. They have the forty werewolves from the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts there already. And anybody captured in this hunting season will benefit them more. Meanwhile, they can use the cover of fear the hunting season provides to work against me, and anyone else who opposes them. The public’s attention will be on werewolves, not wizards in gray cloaks. And why shouldn’t it be? You know as well as I do what kind of opposition this hunting season is going to raise among the packs. All the peace that we tried to keep in London, gone. The alphas will have to strike, to insure that their packs are safe, to protect them if someone comes hunting, to find new hiding places. The Unspeakables just lit our world on fucking fire. And it will get worse if you don’t help me, if you wait for some imaginary day when opposing them will not cost you.”

Scrimgeour’s face had gone the color of ashes. Percy was on his feet, glancing back and forth between the Minister and Harry, nearly vibrating.

“You took down their wards,” Scrimgeour whispered.

Harry nodded, his attention on the walls. The Unspeakables would be weaving wards again soon, but Scrimgeour's office was nearly as far from the Department of Mysteries as one could get and still be in the Ministry. It would take at least a few moments before the wards arrived, and when they got near again, he would destroy them once more. "Yes, I did. That's the reason that you were afraid to speak with me openly, wasn't it? Fear of them?"

"Minister," said Percy, stepping out from behind his desk.

Scrimgeour had recovered something like sense and courage, though. He folded his hands in front of him. "It was." He stared at Harry with a calculating eye. "And what do you intend to do? Burn out the Department of Mysteries?"

Harry half-closed his eyes and reached, out and downwards. He could feel magic pulsing through the Ministry in a thousand directions; he knew and dismissed most of the spells that powered it. Wards slid over his consciousness and faded into the background. The magic protecting Tullianum became meaningless noise. As he dived further and further towards the Department of Mysteries, though, the magic thickened, and the number of unfamiliar spells increased.

And in the center and the heart of it all waited something that slammed like a stone wall against Harry's awareness. He felt it as a hunter's cold, bright, sharp mind. It turned to face him, and he knew it saw him.

He had known something like it once before: the Maze in Lux Aeterna. A mind vastly stronger than any wizard, an alien uncompromised magic. But this was wilder, and stranger, and Harry knew in an instant that he could not fight this thing, not yet. It had had centuries to lie in its place and grow strong. Invading the Department of Mysteries and trying to tangle with it was a suicide mission.

For now.

He opened his eyes, trying to shake the sensation of watching eyes in the back of his own mind, and said, "Not yet. What's in the center of the Department of Mysteries, Minister? Can you tell me that?"

Something from another world?" He thought he knew, from his last conversation with Scrimgeour, but he wanted to be sure.

"The Stone," said Scrimgeour. "It's what chooses them, and what they swear their oaths to."

Harry nodded. He couldn't guess the true nature of the Stone from that brief glimpse, but he knew it was probably the reason the Unspeakables were acting against him. An oath sworn to something like that would be obeyed, and if it decided to send its servants after Harry, they would go.

"So you have a choice now, Minister," he said. "To oppose the hunting season, or not. You told Tonks you wouldn't. Why?"

Scrimgeour's face contorted into a helpless snarl. Harry, as he ate an Unspeakable ward trying to reach up to him, was impressed.

"Because I am this close," Scrimgeour said, holding up two fingers, "to becoming a figurehead in my own Ministry. I move a step out of line, and Amelia Bones can strip me of power. Granted, I don't think she'd last long. None of the other Department Heads would do what she told 'em. But they don't want me commanding 'em, either, at least not without bargains that will take months to work out. And while she was in charge, the Ministry would burn. If you think the wizarding world is on fire now, Harry, it's nothing compared to what would happen if she took it over."

"They've made you into a figurehead already, if you're too frightened to move on provocation like this," Harry said softly. "Don't you see that, Minister? You have nothing to lose now. You can't play your games in the shadows and hope that none of them will notice you any longer. If you stand up and declare martial law, you stand a chance—"

"Of getting nothing done," said Scrimgeour harshly. "The Wizengamot chose to pass that hunting season, Harry, in a secret meeting last night to which I was not invited. They also left out a few other key people who might have objected, Griselda Marchbanks, for example. But there's nothing I can gain by opposing them at the moment."

They'll cast a vote of no confidence, and put Amelia in as temporary Minister. I've already told you what a disaster that will be."

Harry eyed him for a moment. "But if all that's true, sir, then what do you think you can accomplish by staying in office?"

Scrimgeour's face altered, showing an unholy joy Harry had never seen from him before. "Because this hunting season is the beginning of the end," he said. "They're overstepping their bounds, now. A few potential friends I had will fall into my hands like ripe fruit. They didn't think the Wizengamot would go this far. They see now that they will. I can pressure the Department Heads once that happens. A few more pushes, and then a few more, and they'll fall down." He met and held Harry's gaze. "We can keep this conflagration from spreading. We can remove Amelia and other Wizengamot members rotted by fear and replace 'em with new ones. They can still turn me into a figurehead if I object immediately. But a short wait, and I'll have 'em." He narrowed his eyes at Harry. "And of course I said I was supporting the hunting season in front of Tonks. Not stupid, am I?"

Harry let out his breath and ate another ward. He wondered if the Unspeakables were on their way up from the Department of Mysteries, yet. "And what about the Unspeakables, sir?" he asked. "Do you really think they'll let you do this? They can still use their artifacts to change your mind, as long as you remain in the Ministry. And they can corrupt new members of the Wizengamot with fear, the same as they corrupted the others. This hunting season is what they wanted, for whatever obscure reason. They won't let you destroy it."

"The second edict we make is going to be against gathering so many magical artifacts in one place," said Scrimgeour. "The first will be against the hunting season."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Harry softly. "I don't believe this can work. You want to remain within the bounds of law, or at least propriety—" he suspected some of the allies Scrimgeour was talking about were those who would have the power to bribe new friends into joining their side "—and the Unspeakables are already defeating you there."

Scrimgeour narrowed his eyes. "And you want what? Toppling? Revolution?"

"I don't want it in the sense of panting after it," Harry said. "But I think it's necessary, yes."

Scrimgeour shook his head slowly. "And I am not doing this for power," he said. "If I thought there was a chance that Amelia wouldn't damage the Ministry too badly, or that someone other than her would take my place if I abandoned my post now, I would join you. But there isn't."

Harry felt a rush of compassion overtake him. Scrimgeour still thought things wouldn't change too much, that he could reform instead of revolt. And perhaps he was right, at least on his own scale. Perhaps he would be able to pursue the path he preferred and still get things done.

But that ability would come from Harry distracting the Unspeakables and shaking things up.

Harry didn't mind. At least Scrimgeour hadn't dived so far into fear that he was supporting the hunting season blindly. And, he told himself, he had known this would fail. He let the possibility of cooperation with the Minister fall to ashes in his mind, and bowed his head.

"I'm not doing this for power, either," he said. "I'm doing this because I think it's the right thing to do. Good day, Minister." He turned to face the door, eating another ward on the way. Let Scrimgeour have a few more minutes of peace and privacy in which to compose himself.

"You're not going into Tullianum, are you?" Scrimgeour's voice was unmistakably apprehensive.

Harry turned back. "No." Not yet. When that happened, he would have a plan that would let him succeed the first time. Perhaps he could win right now if he went to Tullianum and tried to free forty-one, or more, werewolves, but some of them would certainly die on the way, and innocent Ministry people caught in the way might be hurt.

And there was the very simple truth that Woodhouse wasn't prepared to receive them yet. Harry would do what would give his people the best chance of living, not merely of escape.

He needed information, first. He needed to plan. And for that, he would need Tonks and Moody, and anyone else who might be able to tell him more about the Ministry.

He had already tried to communicate with Hawthorn, and received no answer. That didn't surprise him. The wards in Tullianum blocked post owls from reaching the prisoners. Surely they wouldn't allow anyone to simply speak with one, either.

"I wish you would not do this," said Scrimgeour, but his face was relaxing. Given that Harry had said he wasn't going into Tullianum right now, Harry thought, he must reckon there would be no jailbreak at all. He probably still has trouble imagining me in a full-blown rebellion against the Ministry.

"I wish I didn't have to," said Harry, and then turned and left. He knew Scrimgeour could feel it when the wards came back up. Let the man do what he could to reform the Ministry. That wasn't Harry's task.

He found Tonks waiting, unbothered, in the hallway. She smiled when she saw him, and Harry nodded and took her arm.

"I'll take you to a place you'll be safe," he said. "And then I have to go see a man about some words."

Lucius had expected it: the wards twanging as a sign that Harry had Apparated to the Manor. The only suspense was the specific aid that Harry would ask of him. In any case, his price would be the same. Lucius leaned back a bit further and read more of his Daily Prophet, humming. Terrible news about the hunting season, simply terrible.

He heard footsteps, and looked up to find Harry standing in the entrance to his library. Harry inclined his head. "Lucius."

"Harry." Lucius watched him. Harry's eyes shone with more raw power than he had let loose in a long time. The air around him rippled,

as if he stood in the center of a heat haze. Lucius found it difficult to see the walls and furnishings through the sheer magic. "Did you want something?"

"Yes, I did," said Harry, coming forward a few steps. He didn't sit. He didn't need to. Voldemort would have, Lucius thought, during the First War, but the Dark Lord had possessed the power of making every chair a throne. Harry didn't, not least because he projected the conviction that he didn't think of himself as anything very special. Lucius knew, now, that Harry wouldn't torture him. It removed a certain edge. "You'll have heard the news, of course."

Lucius nodded.

"I'd like to ask you to work for me within the Ministry." Harry's eyes were fastened on him. "Discourage people from participating in the hunting season, and go against the Unspeakables, and trade favors for as much information as you can. I need a finger on the Ministry's pulse, since there's no way I can be there myself for a while."

Lucius smiled at him. "I would be delighted to do that for you, Harry."

"Good," said Harry in relief, and turned towards the doorway.

"If," said Lucius.

He saw Harry's back tense. The heat haze of power rose into pain. Lucius grimaced and rubbed his forehead. The more time he spent around Harry, the more he could go without those twinges, but it never lasted long.

"You are my ally," said Harry, without turning.

"I know that," said Lucius, and it came out sharper than he intended, because of the pain. He rushed to correct his mistake. "I am, of course, Harry. I will obey the Alliance oaths. But using the Malfoy contacts to benefit you is a different thing altogether. Especially over something in which I have as little—interest as I do in the werewolf problem."

Harry spun on one heel. "It can't benefit your family, you mean."

Lucius smiled slightly. "Someone must think of these things, Harry. Narcissa is unlikely to. Draco is too young."

"Name your price," said Harry.

"You withdraw your support from the Grand Unified Theory," said Lucius. "I am not asking you to exile Muggleborns—" a struggle, but he managed to use the right word "—from the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, or stop fighting for their rights. But claiming that there is no difference between us and them, and trying to grant them rights based on that alone, is doomed to failure. Quietly, make it known that you don't believe in the theory. Whisper the right words into the right ears. Remind them that you have a pureblood partner, that you were born of a pureblood line though you renounced your last name, that you are now the legal heir of a very old family. I suspect taking the surname of Black might be necessary, in the end. A simple gesture, but it will accomplish much."

"There is a problem, Mr. Malfoy," said Harry, clenching his jaw while his magic rippled around him. Lucius remained unafraid. Harry was not about to cast Crucio. He knew the signs of that. "I do believe in the theory."

Lucius chuckled softly. "And do you also believe that a new theory is enough to erase a thousand years of culture and ritual?"

"Of course not," said Harry. "The dances, the rituals, the naming traditions, the political loopholes—all of those are valuable and should be protected. Respected. But what it means is that no pureblood family can cling to a supposed genetic difference any more. If someone who wasn't born into the culture learns it, they should be accepted as fully a wizard or witch, just as much as someone like Draco."

Lucius had to restrain a flash of anger. Not only was Harry being unreasonably stubborn, he was daring to compare a trained monkey of a Mudblood to Lucius's own family. A comparison to a family like the Rosiers would have been acceptable.

Keeping his voice calm, Lucius murmured, "And that is what we do not want to see happen. There is a difference. Make it clear that you are aligning yourself with us, that you accept this culture as your own, and that you are reaching out to Muggleborns only for political reasons, and you will have more than you can imagine—not only my help in the Ministry, but the help of pureblood families in other wizarding communities who have hesitated, unsure of your direction."

Harry breathed in and out, eyes fastened on his. Lucius waited. He was sure he would win. He was not asking a sacrifice of Harry that would hurt anyone else, and the boy didn't really care about the power of his name and reputation. He would choose the surname of Black for a good cause, unaware of all the repercussions.

"No," said Harry.

Lucius paused. He could not have heard what he thought he heard. "Excuse me?"

"No," said Harry. "I will not. I support the Grand Unified Theory, Lucius, and the conclusions it reaches, and the changes it will make in our world. If I cannot have your help, then I do not have it. Good day." He nodded once, then turned and began walking in the other direction.

"So changing your name is too great a sacrifice to make?" Lucius mused aloud, not letting his posture alter. His father's lessons had not been learned in vain.

Even if he was a halfblood. But Lucius had had a lot of practice strangling that particular thought, and he did it now without pause.

Harry halted, looking over his shoulder. "I don't think you know what I'm proposing, Lucius," he said. "Open rebellion against the Ministry. Open defiance of the hunting season. Open protection of werewolves, and those who wish to join me. The Alliance of Sun and Shadow remains what it was—an organization to encourage thinking. But this is the beginning of a revolution."

Lucius felt as if he were tipping, falling down the slope of an abyss. It was not a pleasant sensation. The last time he had felt anything like it was when Draco came to him to be confirmed magical heir.

Harry must have seen the twitch of an expression on his face, because he smiled, and the smile was feral. "Yes. This is the beginning of the end. They've finally pushed me too far. I won't be going back to Hogwarts for a while. I'll be in a sanctuary with those who can fully commit to joining me." He breathed in and out, his eyes never leaving Lucius's. "I knew you wouldn't be one of them, so I didn't see the point of asking you for anything but what I did. That you refused me makes the task a little harder, but not impossible. I'll still do this."

Lucius imagined everything he had worked for upended, and he could not restrain a snarl. This was not supposed to happen. Harry was supposed to panic just enough to become amenable to guidance, and remain within the limits, as he always had.

His voice was snowfall, however. "And you are not worried about overstepping the bounds of your vates task?"

Harry laughed. The sound was like wind in the treetops. "Hardly. This hunting season, if allowed to go unchallenged, is the beginning of a whole new oppression of free will, the kind that we haven't seen in four hundred years. I am allowed to push back when someone tramples on free will. That is when they give up their ability to do as they like."

Lucius watched him. Harry gave him one more fierce smile, and then Apparated out. The gift that Lucius had given him at the end of their truce-dance linked Harry to the wards of the Manor, and he could pass in and out of them at will, like a member of the family.

At the moment, Lucius had never regretted any gift more.

He only sat still for a few moments, however, breathing. Then he spoke to his left wrist, reciting the communication spell that Charles Rosier-Henlin had invented.

Draco's voice answered him a moment later. "Harry? Harry. Thank Merlin. I wanted—"

"Draco, this is your father."

His son shut up.

Lucius continued, half-wishing this was a firecall. He wanted to see Draco's face. On the other hand, by the time he could arrange for his son to reach a hearth, either through the Headmistress's office or through Severus, Harry might have spoken to Draco, and then the decision made would be irrevocable, Lucius knew.

"Harry is becoming a rebel against the Ministry, against pureblood tradition, against everything that is right and true," he told his son. "He supports the Grand Unified Theory to an extent that will destroy our culture and make us no different from Mudbloods. He will not agree to the completely reasonable compromise I tried to offer him. Listen to me, Draco. I forbid you to join him in this mad rebellion."

"Father," Draco said faintly, "if you're trying to say that I shouldn't court him, then—"

"Not at all," said Lucius. He didn't want to lose the hold his family had on Harry, and whether Draco agreed to break the joining ritual or not, that was what would occur if he pressed this issue. If he pursued Harry against his father's express permission, then he would be breaking his ties as a Malfoy. Lucius would not let that happen. Draco was his heir, as well as his son, and he would stay that way. "I wish for you to join with Harry when he comes to his senses. But until he comes to his senses, I wish you to stay away from him. Do not join him in his flight. Do not join him in raising wands against the Ministry. Do not protest publicly against the hunting season, or the arrest of Mrs. Parkinson."

"Father," Draco whispered.

"This is my command, Draco, in the name of Lucius and Abraxas," said Lucius, invoking the old, formal terms. "On pain of disownment."

Draco's breath rushed noisily in and out of his lungs. Lucius waited. He knew he would win. If he had allowed Harry to reach Draco, or Draco to argue and build up a head of steam and exercise his impulsive temper, then it would be far more in doubt. But by giving the threat first, he had controlled the interaction.

"I—I understand," Draco said at last.

"Very good," said Lucius, and ended the communication spell, because there was no more to say. He reached out to take up the book he had been studying on mind control spells again, his heartbeat already restored to normal. Things with Harry had not gone exactly as he had hoped, but if he had won no advantage for his family, at least he had contained the damage.

Such a shame about Hawthorn, he thought. Such a shame, indeed. Narcissa stood outside the door of the study until she could be sure that Lucius had finished the communication spell, until the turn of a page signaled that he had resumed his book. Then she turned and began to climb the stairs to her room.

Her back was straight all the while, her neck so stiff it almost hurt. But when she reached her room, she could close the door and lean against it, letting it take some of the weight from her shoulders, and shut her eyes.

She wondered if Lucius had thought she would not find out about his threat to Draco, or whether he had planned to come and tell her later, with just enough honey in the words to sweeten it.

She wondered why he did not see that he had overreached himself, that Draco had said only that he understood, not that he would obey, and that forcing his son to choose between his family and his lover was a test not even Lucius had gone through.

She wondered if Lucius really thought she would simply stand silent throughout this, playing the part of good little wife, as Muggles were said to do.

Narcissa opened her eyes and moved across the room. It was the one place in the house that Lucius never intruded without her express permission, but since he had been in here so often, he assumed he knew the contents. He did not know, or he had forgotten, about the trunk at the back of the closet.

Narcissa gazed at the trunk. It bore her maiden initials, not the married ones, and it bore memories. Her mother had given it to her when she left for Hogwarts, nervous, but not too nervous, for surely she would go into Slytherin, the House where she had two older sisters already. It was made of polished ebony, the initials worked near the lock in silver, and no one but Narcissa could open it.

She opened it now. Unpacked, save for a single folded robe of gold and green. Narcissa had left many of her belongings there when she still considered that perhaps one of the fierce fights she and Lucius had had in the first days of their marriage would send her fleeing home. She had assumed she would not have time to pack completely, but she had wanted something to wear.

As she had learned to trust Lucius, she had removed more and more of the old clothes from the trunk.

Save this one.

Narcissa shut the lid and turned away. She was waiting. She had to wait. She had already made her own decision, but what action came out of that decision would be determined by someone else.

She wondered, while she drew her wand and began to practice dueling spells, why Lucius had never noticed that all their fiercest battles had been about Draco, and that she had won all of them—giving him his name, sending him to Hogwarts instead of Durmstrang, delaying his training in the pureblood rituals until he was of an age not to be broken. She wondered why Lucius had never thought that, if it came to a dispute between her husband and her son, she would side with her son.

She loved Lucius, of that there was no doubt. But she loved Draco more.

Draco felt as though the world had changed into a carousel while he wasn't looking. He lay in the center of his bed, the bed that he had shared with Harry just yesterday. He had given up asking Harry to let him go with him to Wayhouse and guard Morologus. Harry had refused and explained the reasons, and they were good enough reasons. Or they had seemed good enough reasons yesterday, when Draco was sulking from the latest fight they'd had over Harry's brother and his girlfriend. He'd fallen asleep assuming he would see Harry in the morning, and wondering if Harry knew how infuriating it was for him to hold back on his anger, always, and be the calm and sane voice of reason. Draco wanted to see his eyes flash, if only for the possibility that anger might turn into arousal.

And now.

And now.

Draco wondered if the fates had thought him too blind. Obsessed with the argument with Potter, with flirting with Michael just enough to lure him along without breaking his heart, with the utter bitchiness of Potter's girlfriend, and with pushing Harry until he lost his temper and admitted he was human. Had it too been too small a scale of suffering? Had it tempted them too much?

So they had taken it all away—not by killing Harry or wounding Draco, but by giving him a choice between lover and family.

It was not a decision Harry would want him to make, Draco knew. He would say unhesitatingly that Draco should choose his family, because Harry's own rebellion could survive without Draco, but Lucius Malfoy's anger would refuse to blow over, perhaps for the rest of their lives. Harry would hate it, Harry would want Draco at his side, but he would still let him make the choice. Not only would his vates principles demand it, but Harry would consider his personal reasons for wanting Draco at his side not as important as Draco's for wanting to remain where he was.

His father did not even think there was a decision to be made, or he would have pressed Draco for his word.

That meant it was truly Draco's choice.

He had never been so sure that so much depended on his will, and never so unsure that he could make the right decision. He wasn't a Malfoy just then. He wasn't Harry's friend or lover, the role that had most defined the last five years of his life. He was himself. He felt as if he stood on a mountain in the sunlight, but the sunlight was unforgiving, and rather than the view, Draco was more aware that he could be seen for miles and miles.

Whatever he picked, he was going to be different from now on. This choice was going to prune more of his childhood away from him. It was already doing so.

Draco put his hands over his face and lay there, breathing.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Called Woodhouse, Called the Ancient Vale

Minerva sipped her tea. It made her look dignified. There was no one around to see, but that didn't matter. Her parents had once told her that she should be dignified even if she was nothing else, and at the moment, Minerva feared she was dangerously close to being nothing else. She sipped. The teacup trembled in her hand, and threatened to send hot tea sliding over her fingers.

She set the cup down at once, and stared at it grimly.

"He will do the best he can."

Minerva was glad that she wasn't holding the cup now, or she would have surely spilled the drink all over herself when Godric appeared, the Founder's shade looking both stern and hopeful. "I know that," she snapped. "That's not what I was worried about. His best still might not be good enough, and he will not be going to war in the same way he went to war all the other times. He'll be fighting defensively, not offensively. The last time he had to withstand a siege, he did not do it well."

"He will not be withering under a pitched grief this time," Godric murmured. "Nor with people who blame him for what has happened."

Minerva frowned, remembering the expression she had seen on Harry's face when she had told him about Hawthorn. For a moment, it had been frighteningly empty, like looking down a mine shaft, or into Voldemort's eyes. Then she had seen guilt and self-loathing of the kind she was familiar with from last term climb into the expression. And then it had all changed, with a speed that was equally frightening, into determination.

"I think he has transformed his grief," she told Godric quietly. "He will use it to drive himself forward."

The Founder blinked, then spread his hands. "But that is a good thing, surely?"

Minerva couldn't explain why she thought it was a bad thing. It was certainly something she would have been proud of one of her Gryffindors for doing. And it was a far more healthy tactic than Harry had used to cope the last time he blamed himself for something.

Yet the unease remained.

And so did the bitter realization she had suffered as she looked into Harry's face: she could do nothing to help him without jeopardizing her school and the position of responsibility she had chosen, but if he had asked, she would have tried to do—something. She did not know what it would have been, but it would still have been done.

She scowled into her tea.

It was not pleasant to know that, after Albus and after her knowledge that she had to care for the students of Hogwarts when no one else would, she had found a leader who could have commanded her to follow him with a word.

Harry was impressed with the speed that the southern goblins used to get him into a room alone, especially since he hadn't come to see the hanarz or to discuss goblin politics, just to open a new account. He assumed that they had something they wanted him to do, however, so he inclined his head politely when the hanarz appeared. She had not changed since he had seen her last, still with dark gray skin, direct eyes, and the silver chain around her neck. Harry kept an eye on the metal. He had seen her work magic with the shackles set into her skin last time. If she had something to accuse him of, something to hurt him for, the chains were the means by which she would do it.

"Harry."

Startled, Harry met her gaze. He had never heard her call him that—but, of course, he hadn't seen her since he renounced his last name. He nodded. "Yes?"

The hanarz leaned forward across the carved stone table that separated them. The guards behind her carried quivers of arrows and

bows and wore heavy ornaments at their throats, but didn't react as their leader neared him. Harry supposed they must consider him safe, perhaps because he had freed the southern goblins with the help of several other wizards in a cooperative ritual. "We know what it will mean, that you are fighting the Ministry and freeing the werewolves," she said.

Harry stared before he could help himself. He wondered if they had figured that out from reading about the hunting season in the newspaper and the fact that he had come to them when he was supposed to be in Hogwarts, or through a more magical means. "It means full-out rebellion," he said, nodding. "I didn't come here today to involve you in it, hanarz. I mean only to insure that they cannot freeze the Black accounts, so I'm transferring money into another one."

"We have gifts for you," said the goblin, as if she had not heard him. She removed one corner of the robe that covered her, and the dark iron chain that curled out of the side of her throat and into her right shoulder rose. Harry watched it twitch and throb and hum. Then it lashed towards him, and a wave of sound shot over his head, causing him to duck. Harry turned, but could see nothing visible as the wave of sound hit the stone, and, apparently, traveled through it and on.

"What was that?" he asked, turning back.

"A call," said the hanarz, "to let those who hear it know that the vates is fighting for the rights of magical creatures and needs help. Those who wish to answer it will. It is not audible to human ears," she added, "no matter what they use to listen." Harry, his mouth open, closed it again, nodding. He had been afraid the Unspeakables might use some artifact to intercept the call and ambush any allies on their way to him.

"The second gift is one we were asked to keep in trust for you," the hanarz said, "by someone who approached us with awe and humility. We honored her request." She snapped her fingers, a sound like breaking twigs, and one of the guards stepped forward with a tiny chest. Harry knew the chests of Gringotts, thought, and suspected this one was linked to a vault, transporting the money from it into the

chest until the owner said to stop. The guard opened it, and Harry blinked. Inside lay jewels instead of the coins he had expected—small diamonds, tiny rubies, silver and golden ornamented bracelets that he could tell at once weren't magical but would fetch hefty prices. Harry blinked again, this time to clear some of the dazzle from his eyes.

"Henrietta Bulstrode left this for us," said the hanarz. "In accordance with the Unbreakable Vow that you asked of her, she donated half her money to begin an Augurey sanctuary. But she converted other money for you, since her daughter wanted nothing that came from her."

"Why jewels?" Harry whispered.

"We will sell them for you," said the hanarz. "The money will return to a new account, linked to neither her nor you—a goblin vault. Thus we will make sure the Ministry cannot get to you even if they do manage to freeze most of the human monies here." Her lip curled. "We will take particular pleasure in offering the jewels for sale to Ministry officials."

Harry let out his breath. "I thank you, hanarz. This is too much—"

"And not done yet."

The hanarz nodded to the goblin who had escorted Harry here, and whom he was vaguely aware had remained standing just behind his shoulder. He hurried out of the room, and returned in a few moments, his feet flapping gently on the stone floor. Harry examined what he held. The dark, curving object was not one he saw every day, and he finally realized it was a horn, carved of a black tusk of some kind, and banded with silver.

"What is it?" he whispered, lifting the horn. The grasp the goblin had used to hold it was only reverent, he saw. The horn was marvelously light, and moved like a dancer's hand in his.

"A horn to call our aid," said the hanarz. "It will send a summons through rock and stone. We would prefer not to move yet, as we

prepare to reveal our freedom to the world of wizards, but you are vates, and you have freed us, and that makes you ours as much as it makes you anyone's." She nodded to the horn. "This is carved of karkadann alicorn, from the beasts we hunted in the days when we ranged further afield than Gringotts. No wizard has had it since Salazar Slytherin bound us." Her intense yellow eyes fixed on his.

Harry ducked his head, embarrassed. For over a thousand years, then. He, Draco, Snape, and others had been the ones who freed the southern goblins from Slytherin's binding. "You're certain you wish to give me this?" he asked.

"We are more than certain," said the hanarz. "By gold and iron, by steel and stone, by silver and bronze, you have kept your promises."

Harry nodded, and slipped the horn into his pocket. "I'd like to set up the new vault, please."

"Of course, Harry." The hanarz bowed to him with a sound of clinking chains. "Vates."

Draco sat in Defense Against the Dark Arts and tried to pay attention; he really did. But the decision he had to make seemed to sit beside him, in the place where Harry should have been, and poke him with a long bony finger, and whisper words that Draco did not want to listen to.

What happens if you decide against your family? Harry would still accept you without the Malfoy name and money, of course, but you would not be what you have always been. You would be a penniless wizard, with only your possession gift and your pure blood to be proud of—and since Harry supports the Grand Unified Theory, you would not be allowed to be proud of your pure blood.

What happens if you decide against Harry? He will accept the decision, of course, but someone else might get close to him. Look at that Syrinx. Draco stared at the Gloryflower girl, sitting calmly on the other side of the classroom. You know that she's going to go to him the moment he summons her. It's not impossible that they could share things that you won't get to experience, that Harry would

become more and more like her the more time he spent around her. It's happened before. Snape and I managed to influence him against his family.

"Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco almost flinched. Someone calling him by that name just then was unfortunate timing. He looked up and met Pettigrew's eyes. "Yes, sir?" he said quietly.

Pettigrew nodded. "Can you demonstrate Ventus for us?"

It was a wind spell, one they had practiced half a hundred times in the dueling club. Draco did it without thought, from his seat, and a wind blew across the room and snatched a pile of scrolls off Pettigrew's desk, sending them tumbling all over.

The professor simply raised an eyebrow, though several students giggled. One of the things that made him such a good teacher, Draco thought, was how calm he was, and how little quarter he gave to emotions like frustration that managed to distract and destroy "teachers" like Trelawney and Hagrid.

"Not quite what I had in mind, Mr. Malfoy," said Pettigrew. "If you would leave your seat and demonstrate the wand movement for us? I will show you how to combine Ventus with other spells, but one must be sure of the wrist turn first." He stepped out of the way, and Draco stood and walked up to the desk.

He would have welcomed a chance to show off before the class, ordinarily. Now, he had to clench his hand down to keep it from trembling. His decision walked behind him, all the way up, and he was intensely aware of the watching eyes.

What will they think of you, if they make the wrong decision? The bony finger-poked his shoulder again. What will your mother think of you? The other pureblood families? None of them will look at you with disappointment as fiery as your father's, but what they will say about you will be scathing enough. "Don't be like Draco Malfoy, son. He chose his halfblood lover over family honor."

He snapped his wand down and across, performing Ventus again, and listened half-heartedly as Pettigrew explained to the rest of them that he wanted to combine a flame spell with it that would turn the wind into a wall of fire. Once, it would have made him sing with glee to learn an incantation like that. Now, he simply wanted Harry to be there again and his father to be sane and all to be well with the world.

And if I don't choose Harry, none of his allies will ever trust me again. Pettigrew will look at me with disappointment in his eyes. There goes all chance of a peaceful settlement with his brother. I should live in fear of Professor Belluspersona. And Snape... Draco shuddered. He had been the one to tell the Seer, Joseph, that Harry was gone. Shortly after Draco had returned to the Slytherin common room, there had come a spell that shook the dungeons, and a shrieking that set his hair on end.

Snape had not appeared in Potions classes today. Joseph had come in instead, with the plans for it, and managed to teach the classes competently, if not well. Draco wondered what had upset Snape more: learning that Harry was gone, or why. Harry had not even asked Snape for help with defending Morologus, since he had assumed that Snape would of course not want to be anywhere near Loki when he transformed, and he had enough of his own problems. Draco thought Harry considered Snape essentially "wounded in action" lately, a casualty, not his guardian.

And, well, that might be true, but there was nothing to say that attitude would not infuriate Snape.

"I think that's enough to go on," said Professor Pettigrew, who had just finished explaining the theory, apparently, and was now summoning another student to the front of the classroom to demonstrate the flame charm.

It took Draco three tries to master the combination of spells, much longer than it normally did. The whole time, voices murmured and collided in his head.

Did you really think that you could avoid making this choice forever? Did you think that your father and Harry would be content to work side by side forever? Did you think that neither of them would make a demand that the other would be unable to fulfill?

Yes, I bloody well did, Draco thought, savagely, to make the voices shut up. The only time they've ever been this close to open conflict, I managed to avert it by out-dancing my father. And he's tied his own fate more and more to Harry's since then. He began the truce-dance not long after he nearly killed him with Tom Riddle's diary. I had a right to think it would continue.

The voice had no answer for that, and Draco's head cleared. By the time Defense class ended and he had listened to Professor Pettigrew's assignment to write an essay on the theory of combining charms for homework, he had decided that perhaps what was most wrong was the way he was thinking about this.

Instead of thinking about what I'm going to lose, I should think about what I'm going to achieve by choosing either way. What's in it for me?

And, most importantly, what do I want?

Snape felt as though someone had taken a mallet to his mind.

He paced in circles around his quarters, from which Joseph had been banished, from which he had removed his students' essays, from which everything that could take damage was gone. It had to be that way. The spells he felt the urge to cast, and which he did not deny himself, because they rid him of the rage that threatened to cloud his head, would too easily kill someone else or destroy parchment.

The mallet blow had come in the form of a combination of news: what Harry had done the night before last, defending a hunter from a werewolf and losing the hunter, and Harry's flight from Hogwarts.

Harry had contacted Joseph to say that he was well after his adventure with the hunter, so that Joseph would pass along the news to Snape. He had not talked to him directly.

He had not asked Snape for help in defending the hunter.

He had not talked to him before he ran away to confront the Ministry and perhaps come close to losing his life. In all of those actions, he had assumed that his guardian was too weak to help, or even to tolerate hearing Harry's voice come from his left wrist.

And he had been right.

Snape could see what he had become now in relation to Harry. It maddened him. Harry had not blinked an eye once the dreams, and the decay of Snape's emotional walls, started. He had put himself in Snape's way for as long he could, insisted on his getting help, displaced Snape from his immediate presence once he attacked Camellia, talked to Snape through Joseph, written him letters, showed him the love in his eyes when Snape used Legilimency on him.

They were all steps that he might have taken for another of his wounded allies—steps that he might have taken with his own parents if they had not been hopelessly weak, and arrested by the time Harry had the strength to do so.

Harry did not consider him a guardian any more. He would not ask Snape for help, because he believed that Snape had no help to give him. So he took care of Snape instead, and turned him into a petitioner, a dependent on his good will and generosity. Harry had no parental figure any longer, and he had adapted to it with surprising speed and grace, because he had to, and because he had walked without parents for so long that it was second nature to him.

It drove Snape mad.

All those years of earning Harry's trust, of showing him that Snape could help him where no others could, of getting Harry to relax enough to let someone else protect him and be the strong one—wasted. Snape knew Harry might relax in someone else's protection while he recovered from a wound, but that did not imply trust. It

implied practicality. Harry would still be thinking as a defender, and when he healed, he would take the defender's position once more.

He'd thought he could not be a good son last year, Snape remembered. But he had been wrong, hadn't he? It had been Snape who was not a good parent.

He turned and cast a crumbling curse at a table he'd Transfigured from a feather. It showed down in shards of wood, and helped keep Snape from the whispering pain that tried to enter the back of his head.

I have no son. And through my own actions, because I transformed, and Harry changed to meet me—took the position of healer. Why shouldn't he? He is used to being that for everyone else.

Snape did not know if he would have the strength to push beyond the circle of his self-justifications and hazy rationalizations and double binds if it was only for his own sake that he was doing it. After all, it was so much easier to lie in the middle of the mud and bewail his fate. And Harry would not mind him doing it, would simply keep up being the parent for however long he had to.

But for Harry's sake, he could plunge through the disgust and the hatred and the pain.

He could not join Harry yet. He was wise enough to know that. But when he had healed enough of his bleeding wounds that he could be an asset, then he would go, and tell Minerva to hire Slughorn in his place for however long it took.

He summoned again the will that had kept him alive and spying for that year among the Death Eaters, when it would have been so much easier to surrender to the darkness, or lie down and die. He wanted his son back.

Then he shouted for Joseph.

"I did try to tell you." Camellia's voice was strung-out, worn out, defeated. "No one can stop a werewolf on the vengeance-path for his mate, Harry. Not even you."

"I could have Apparated away," Harry whispered. He sat in a room in the main building of Woodhouse, the wooden one in the center of the stone quadrangle, watching the sun rise. He had slept well enough last night, casting Consopio on himself so that he wouldn't lie awake and worry about things, but he'd asked Tonks to shake him near dawn, since he didn't know how to modify the sleeping charm so it would end at a specific time yet. Getting the right amount of sleep was very important. "I could have taken Kieran somewhere else."

"It wouldn't have mattered," said Camellia quietly. "How do you think Loki found Wayhouse in the first place? No one told him, Harry. The presence of the prey a werewolf takes vengeance on pulls him along. You could have Apparated anywhere you liked. He could have followed."

"If we kept Apparating—"

"Eventually, you would have lost strength," said Camellia. "Eventually, you would have had to sleep. And then he would have caught up. I did try to warn you. I told you that he couldn't be stopped or turned aside."

Harry rubbed his scar. He would get angry if he spent too long thinking about this, and that would mean another headache. "I wanted to tell you that the pack should be ready to come to Woodhouse by the end of today. The Black estates won't be safe for long, and they're no place to hide forty-one more werewolves."

"And you think Woodhouse will be?" The sarcasm, and skepticism, was clear in Camellia's voice. "What makes it any safer? As soon as you free those werewolves, you'll be an outlaw in truth, Wild."

"And you would rather have me not free them?" Harry raised his eyebrows, and wished again that Charles had managed to modify the spell to make someone's face visible. He wanted to see what Camellia looked like right now. "I have to, Camellia. I have a formal family oath pulling at me as well as the wider one I swore to help

werewolves. But I thought you would be glad. They are your own kind.”

“I want you safe, Wild,” Camellia whispered. “And if that is selfish, so be it.”

Harry smiled tolerantly. “Ah. That I can understand. But yes, I do plan to make Woodhouse safe.” He stood up. “I have to go now, Camellia. Get the pack ready. I’ll contact you near evening with detailed Apparition instructions for those that can Apparate.”

He waited only for her assent before he cut off the communication spell. Then he strode from the study through the halls to the kitchen.

Woodhouse had narrower rooms than any place he’d ever been. The walls seemed to arrange themselves in cramped corridors and hidden nooks behind staircases on purpose. And, of course, everything was made of wood. Harry thought it might actually be perfect for werewolves; there were many small “territories” they could doze in if they wanted to be alone, the study and kitchen and a few other large rooms for piles, and the intense, comforting smell of trees everywhere.

Tonks was waiting in the kitchen, looking through the Daily Prophet and idly munching on a piece of burned toast that she’d made out of bread delivered that morning. Harry had contacted a few Squib-run shops in wizarding London, which were grateful for the custom and didn’t mind sending the owls up early to fly with bread and orange juice and other things to Woodhouse. Harry made a mental note to himself to switch other deliveries from Grimmauld Place and Copley-by-the-Sea to Woodhouse. With eighty people here, or more than eighty, food would otherwise be a problem.

“What are they saying?” he asked, when Tonks peeked around the paper to wish him good morning for the second time.

“The usual nonsense,” said Tonks. “I don’t think anyone really knows what you’re doing yet, but they can speculate on it. They know you’ve left Hogwarts. They think that you’ve decided to go into seclusion and, I quote Honeywhistle quoting someone else, ‘brood on what he thinks is injustice.’”

Harry snorted and spread marmalade across another piece of the bread. "Well, then, I ought to take them by surprise."

Tonks nodded. "Moody said that he would come around noon?"

"Yes. I hope that's enough time to accomplish what I need to do." Harry bit into his bread and stared out the window. Beyond lay Woodhouse's valley, more than half brown now that autumn had begun, but with some grass still growing green and luxuriant from the constant rain. "If not, then you and he start planning the best route for our attack on Tullianum."

"Remind me again what you're doing."

Harry looked at Tonks. Her face was serious, and he was startled to see a resemblance to Narcissa there, which he didn't think he'd ever noted before. Her hair was flat black, and hung in close curls around her face. She had retained the same lightning-blue eyes from yesterday, though.

"A technique called entering the dream," Harry said, swallowing a bite of his bread. "We can't use a lot of magic here in Woodhouse, and defensive wards will only hold for so long. What will make this a true sanctuary is to convince the place that we're part of it, and to use its magic to defend us."

"And you think you can do this." Tonks's voice was flat, and a match for Camellia's in its skepticism.

Harry nodded. "Hermione found me some notes on the subject. Mostly, wizards and witches don't do it because they don't want to make the effort required, or pay the price."

"Price?" Tonks's voice had sharpened, as had her gaze. Harry wondered if she thought him suicidal.

He wasn't. He couldn't afford to be. He had read Hermione's notes until he nearly went blind yesterday, in between arranging for the establishment of a separate vault and food deliveries. "Yes. You have

to stay bound to a place for a certain period of time after you enter its dream and get it to notice you. Witches and wizards prefer not to do that. I can, now.” He finished his breakfast. “I’ll leave for small journeys like freeing the werewolves from Tullianum, but otherwise I’ll stay in Woodhouse for at least a month. It’ll make a fine base.”

“What else is involved?”

“Humility,” said Harry quietly, standing. “Being able to set aside thoughts of oneself and focus on something larger. Getting used to an alien mind.” He smiled. “I think that being vates has prepared me for that if anything can.”

Tonks reached out and clasped the stump of his left wrist. “Be careful.”

“Of course.” Harry stifled the odd thought for a moment that no one else should touch him there, because that was Draco’s place to touch. Then he shook his head and stepped out of the wooden house into the sunlight of Woodhouse.

It would be a clear, calm day, he thought. There were clouds passing across the sky, but they were underlit, and only served to make the blue appear brighter. The woods blocking one end of the valley shone, since they were mostly evergreens. Puddles lay here and there among the browned grass, making Harry blink in surprise as they caught the sun with unexpected dazzle, like the jewels that Henrietta had arranged for him.

He sat down in a patch of grass not far from the stone quadrangle, beneath a lone oak. He could feel the steady current of the place magic circling the valley, attending to its stones and hills and trees, the long-lived, non-moving things, loving them, paying no attention to small moving wizards and witches who rushed about.

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Consopio,” he whispered.

And he fell into his own dreams, seizing control of them with Legilimency even as he fell, remembering what Hermione's notes had said.

Entering the dream means blending one's own dreams with the place. Most wizards and witches, not having conscious control of their dreams, cannot do this. A Legilimens, or someone using the Lucid Dream charm, may manage it.

Harry dreamed of himself sitting in a place much like the one he had actually chosen to sit in, his mind reaching outward. The current of place magic was visible here, because he wanted it to be, a rushing white tide that crested against the stones on one side of the valley, then washed over the trees, then turned and danced over the buildings that had been here so long the magic no longer objected to them. Patrolling, ignoring, dreaming, it continued along its busy way.

Harry reached out and slid his dream flawlessly into the dream of the current, matching it, trying to see what it did.

And Woodhouse noticed him.

The first touch of its awareness nearly paralyzed Harry, so alien was it. Woodhouse had no conception of distance or direction. It was itself, forest and trees and houses and stone and the sky above, and every point on its body was equally distant from every other point. The only thing Harry could compare it to was a tapestry, or the way a tapestry might think of itself if it were sentient. Every thread connected to every other thread, and there was no center, so it might be said to be all of a piece.

No notion of separateness was tolerated. The moving creatures that rushed about in Woodhouse were separate, but of them it was not obliged to take any notice. They tried to move it around and make parts of it be alone, and it took away those parts and put them back. It was itself, and it dreamed.

Harry felt the urge to struggle madly back to the surface, into his own head and his own dreams. But Hermione's notes had words to say on that, too.

The wizard who cannot give up his own individuality, even for a few moments, cannot enter the dream. He must trust to the place magic. He must submit himself to a greater purpose. The place magic is no more malicious than the ocean. As a swimmer is at the mercy of the waves and not in command of them, so the wizard must become—but even more like a piece of driftwood than a swimmer, knowing himself borne to a place he does not choose, and not contesting it.

Harry took a deep breath and submerged himself. Old notions helped. The idea that he was important and separate from his duty was the new one, the idea he had come to late in life, not the other way around. He imagined Woodhouse as the world, the place he had to save, the thing infinitely more precious and beautiful and important than one small wizard. He slid away.

He drowned.

Woodhouse was aware that a new thing had entered it. It examined the new thing. It was a seed that might someday become a tree, blown in from elsewhere. The seed had buried itself in strange soil for a tree, but the soil was just as important as the ordinary ground. Sunlight warmed it, and water fed its lips, and it grew upward just as the other seeds would. But it was a tree that grew like a flower, dying in a short time.

Woodhouse turned it over and over. The small thing turned with the turning. It had branches, branches with bare twigs; it must have dropped its leaves early. It walked on stone, but did not stay rooted there. Trees did not stay rooted when a storm came and blew them over, either. It did not want to be separate. Nothing wanted to be separate that was part of itself. The dream blended with its dream, and the thing was not a small rushing thing anymore; it was part of Woodhouse. It could still move, of course, because every point in Woodhouse was part of itself.

It might go away, but it would arrive again. It might move stones from the valley's walls, but they were its own stones, as much a part of Woodhouse as its own limbs were. It might bring other small rushing things. For its sake, Woodhouse would tolerate them. It tolerated the

migrating birds that came in and rested for a day and departed again. They would be part of it for as long as they stayed.

Woodhouse noticed it, and liked it, and made the small rushing thing part of itself, and put its dream back into its head, because the small rushing thing could not stay asleep all the time, any more than the sky could stay light all the time. But it would always be part of the dream.

Harry blinked and sat up, slowly. He still felt as if his head had cracked open and let in the sea; that was the only experience he had had, before now, of such vastness. His hand trembled as he stroked his own hair, and he looked at the valley with new eyes. In its own way, it was as vast as the ocean. Take the world of every blade of grass and tie it together with the world in every nook and cranny of each tree and the thoughts of every bird and the gleam of the dissipating puddles...

Harry shook his head, dazed. The sun stood near noon now, and he thought that Moody must have arrived. He stood, shakily, and made his way back towards the quadrangle of buildings.

The current of place magic circled past him, and tugged at him as if he stood in water. Harry smiled in spite of himself. He was part of it now.

And if half of Hermione's notes, or a quarter of what else Harry had read on place magic, were true, then Woodhouse would protect him, when his enemies tried to attack, as if it were defending itself, because he was part of it. Power slept in stone and tree and soil and earth. He could not ask for a safer haven for the werewolves.

Draco was so deep in thought, considering what he would gain by choosing Harry or choosing his family—and the advantages were considerable, on either side—that he didn't hear Potter until the other boy came up behind him and actually shouted his name into his ear.

Draco turned around, one hand on his wand, and arched his eyebrow. "Potter? What do you want?"

"I wanted to know what you'd decided about Harry, of course," said Potter flatly, as if he had a perfect right to the knowledge. "Are you going to abandon him like so many other people are, or are you going to stand beside him?"

"I'm thinking about it," said Draco, and made sure that his voice was the one his father used for dealing with idiots. Potter's face turned red, predictably.

"You know that Harry would choose you in an instant," he accused, voice gone tight.

If I was so mad as to ask him to choose between you and me, the way you've been doing? Draco stared into Potter's eyes, and reminded himself that Harry wouldn't want him to curse his brother. Besides, they were in the middle of a corridor between classes, where any professor could see and stop them. "I don't think you understand my choice," he said. "There are factors you aren't aware of." And which I won't tell you about, because you'd be stupid enough to bleat, and then my father would become aware of it, and force my hand. This is my choice.

"Well, tell me what they are." Potter folded his arms and gave him a challenging glance.

"No."

Potter started to answer, but the voice of his bitch of a girlfriend interrupted him. "Don't worry, Connor. If he won't tell, then he won't tell, and there's nothing we can say to make him change his mind. Besides, this is just more evidence that Malfoy doesn't really care about Harry."

Potter, to his very small credit, looked uneasy as Patil wrapped her arm around his shoulders and led him away, but he didn't object. Draco snorted at both their backs.

The idea that people would think him unsupportive of Harry because he hadn't said anything about Harry's disappearance or the werewolf situation so far entered his mind. He dismissed it. He was not going

to let other make people make him afraid, or influence his decision. He would not.

He thought he knew what his choice would be, how the scales were tipping, but he wanted it to be true. Neither Lucius nor Harry would welcome him if he made his decision and then regretted and whined about it later.

The way I whined about Potter and Patil?

Draco could feel his face flushing a dull red, and was glad that almost everyone else was in Arithmancy already, so that no one could see. He did pause to lean against a wall and take a deep breath before he entered the classroom, as much to come to terms with this new and disturbing realization as to hope that his face cooled down.

I was acting like a child. Father would have been disappointed in me. Harry probably was, but said nothing about it. That decision was as much mine as anyone else's, and I was making the wrong one.

That only increased his determination not to make the wrong one this time.

Connor blinked. Of all the things he had expected Peter to say when he sought him out and told him that he wanted to help Harry, this wasn't one of them. "You think I ought to just stay at Hogwarts?"

Peter raised a hand, then cast a locking ward on the door. It was one he had used a few times at Copley-by-the-Sea to insure that no one would interrupt their Animagus lessons. Connor sat down in a chair beneath a banner that depicted the Pied Piper of Hamelin legend and waited for Peter to take the chair across from him. Peter had arranged his quarters to be smaller and warmer than the ones either Sirius or Remus had had when they taught here. Connor still felt a jolt of homesickness when he looked around. He would have liked it if either Sirius or Remus's quarters had looked like this. He would have loved it if James had been a good father, and had been able to become Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.

"Connor."

He looked back at Peter. Peter had that serious, stern, thoughtful look on his face, the one he only got when he was about to say something really important. Connor clasped his hands and leaned forward.

“Your support is essential to Harry,” Peter told him. “You can speak out against the anti-werewolf laws, and against Mrs. Parkinson’s arrest. You can do whatever you think you need to do so that other people will understand that you think these laws are a horrible, horrible thing. But would you be willing to leave Hogwarts and go to where Harry is now?”

Connor blinked. He hadn’t thought that far ahead. He had pictured himself fighting at Harry’s side in battle, comforting him when Malfoy made the choice to do nothing that he seemed closer and closer to making, and standing with him when he won, as he inevitably would. Someone, he hadn’t thought about the day-to-day business of life with Harry in the meantime.

“And would Parvati want to come with you?” Peter asked.

That was something he hadn’t thought of. Connor huffed out a breath. “I suppose not,” he said. “She doesn’t—like Harry all that much. I mean, she knows that he’s important to me because he’s my brother, and she wants him to pay more attention to me because of that, but that doesn’t mean that she would want to run away from Hogwarts and fight battles at his side.”

Peter was nodding. “And Harry wouldn’t want you to make the choice to abandon her,” he said. “Besides, he’s going to need someone here at Hogwarts who can watch what the students are thinking, and report it to him. Professor Belluspersona and I can only do so much, since professors don’t hear all the gossip among the students. McGonagall has to think about what’s best for the school first and foremost. Snape...” Peter grimaced as if he’d bitten into a wormy apple and shook his head. “Harry needs someone who can know what direction the students’ thoughts are turning, and what gossip they’re reporting from their parents.”

“Ah.” Connor nodded his head. “And you know that Malfoy won’t do it, because he’s not loyal to Harry.”

Peter made a choking noise. Connor squinted suspiciously at him. If he didn’t know better, he would say Peter was holding back a laugh. But why should he be? He was clever, quick, observant. He had to know what Malfoy’s current behavior was like, and what it meant. Connor felt far less pleasure than he had thought he would about being right. Malfoy was faithless, it was the last day of the full moon and he was doing nothing, and that would hurt Harry.

“Something like that,” said Peter. “But in any case, he’s not trusted by as many people as you are. He’s too conspicuous, and people will be watching him more than the other way around.”

“Won’t they do the same thing to me, once I declare my support of Harry?” Connor asked.

“They’ll expect it of you, I think,” said Peter, smiling. “Show them Gryffindor honesty, and listen with Slytherin deviousness.”

“I can do that,” Connor muttered. “I think it’s Gryffindor deviousness, though.”

Peter nodded. “The other Houses tend to underestimate us and our skills in sneaking around.” He clasped Connor’s shoulder. “Let’s do what we can to support Harry and not hinder him, the way that going to him when you’re only half-trained in battle and worried about Parvati probably would.”

The words were so gentle that Connor couldn’t flinch from them. He nodded, newly determined on the best probable course. “Right.”

Harry nodded. “And I highly doubt they’ve managed to change the corridors of Tullianum in two days’ time,” he said. “I would be more worried about the traps the Department of Mysteries might have set up along the way.”

Moody snorted, his real eye shining with excitement. His magical eye was fastened on the rough map that he, Tonks, and Harry had worked out of Tullianum. Since both Moody and Tonks had been

Aurors, they had both patrolled the new prison and stood guard on the cells, and knew it fairly well. “If you’re really worried about them, boy...”

He trailed off. Harry looked up. He didn’t think he’d ever seen Moody looking shifty before—except for when he’d truly been Mulciber, and probably couldn’t help it. “What?” he asked.

“I have some—contacts who would help.” Both Moody’s eyes looked at the map now, as if he wanted to avoid showing his real emotions. “People I came to know during my years as an Auror. People not entirely on the wrong side of the law, but not in good graces with the Ministry either.”

Harry nodded. He had once heard Moody described as the wildest of the Aurors. It made sense that he would have friends who existed on both sides of the fence, so long as those friends weren’t Death Eaters or other criminals who had done things that Moody considered wrong. The old man’s sense of justice was infinitely more personal than Harry had thought when he first met him. He had made his peace with Harry using Dark magic, after all, as long as he did the right thing with it. “If you think they can be helpful, then invite them along. Or ask for information from them. Which were you planning on?”

“Both,” said Moody blandly, and then gestured at the map with his hip, a gesture Harry thought he might have developed over the years since he’d earned his wooden leg. “When are you planning to attack?”

“In a few days,” said Harry. “I wanted to wait for the full moon to pass, of course, and then I wanted to give some time for my allies to catch their breaths and think rationally about what they want to do.”

Moody narrowed his eyes as if sniffing out a rat. “If they’re loyal to you, they should have been here already, boy.”

Harry stared at him calmly. “I’m not forcing anyone,” he said, “except those who declare themselves in support of the anti-werewolf laws. Then I’ll force them aside. But Mr. Malfoy, for example, has decided not to aid me unless I renounce the Grand Unified Theory.”

“And the others?” Moody’s voice was a growl.

“Some have responsibilities they can’t abandon,” said Harry, thinking of McGonagall and Henrietta and Peter. “Some are already doing other tasks, and it’s essential that they remain in place.” He’d asked Rose and a few other werewolves from his pack whom he trusted to go to London and ask the alphas if they wanted to bring their people to shelter under him. Depending on how many of them came, there might be a need for fewer guards on the London packs when October’s full moon rose. Honoria was going to come with them when they attacked Tullianum to lend the expertise of her illusions, but then she would return to the Maenad Press, where Harry thought she could do the most good. “And some are dealing with problems of their own.” Snape, and Narcissa Malfoy, who would surely choose to side with her husband.

“And some of them you simply haven’t called,” Moody finished, sounding disgusted.

Harry met his eyes and nodded. “I’m asking for full commitment. I didn’t want anyone to grant that and feel bad later.”

He expected another sarcastic comment; instead, Moody watched him and murmured, “So different from Albus.”

Harry gave an uneasy shrug. Then he turned sharply as his left wrist rang with phoenix song. Touching it, he asked, “What is it?”

“Strangers,” said Camellia’s tense voice. Harry had asked her to be one of the watchers on the valley’s outer edge, since she’d refused to go to London without him. “They’re—” She paused, and then her voice said, soft with wonder, “They’re not human.”

Harry blinked, said, “I’ll be there,” and slipped out of the wooden house, Moody right behind him. He couldn’t see anything until they managed to make their way around the stone buildings, though.

Camellia and the other sentries stood in a ring around a group of perhaps thirty goblins. When he drew near, however, Harry could see

that they weren't a delegation of southern goblins come to visit. They were northern, tall, with much longer claws and teeth, and six fingers on either hand. Bronze and gold sparked from heavy bracelets and anklets. Harry knew their leader, and tilted his head down in deference as he approached them.

"Helcas Seadampin," he said. "Welcome."

Helcas, the goblin Harry had first contacted when they began to talk about removing the web that contained the linchpins, swept a full and fluid bow. He seemed to move more easily than the last time Harry had seen him. Harry wondered if that was the effect of the web being gone, or simple happiness. Certainly there was wild joy in his face as he held out his hand, carefully closing his jagged claws around Harry's wrist.

"Harry vates." Helcas nodded over his shoulder. "There are goblins with us from all four clans, Seadampin and Stonecantor and Waterrune and Ternretten." Harry wasn't surprised to notice that there weren't thirty goblins there after all, but thirty-two. Some carried spears, some bows and quivers, some lengths of what Harry thought was chain, but which shone so brilliantly he couldn't be sure. "We are ready to go to war beside you," Helcas continued, and that got Harry's attention.

"You're sure?" The northern goblins had waited to reveal their freedom. Harry had assumed, without a real reason to now that he'd thought about, that they would wait as long as their southern cousins. But, of course, it was stupid to assume so. The Gringotts goblins had much more to do with humans now. They would cause more chaos when they moved. The northern ones would mostly show off just how powerful they were.

"Of course we are," said Helcas, and there was a softness in his tone that Harry hadn't known he was capable of, since his voice was like a gull's shriek. "Vates. You are ours, as much as you are anyone's. You will not stand alone." He grinned then, a girding wall of so many fangs there was barely room for his tongue. "And it is time that wizards learned what goblins are capable of. We have not been to war in centuries."

Harry nodded, overwhelmed. "The hanarz's call summoned you?"

"We heard of your need that way," said Helcas. "That does not mean she is the only reason we are here."

Harry nodded again and started to say something else, but the ground shook with a familiar thunder then, and he turned instinctively towards the forest entrance of the valley, since that was where they had entered during the spring alliance meeting. And, sure enough, the centaurs appeared, their hides glinting palomino and bay and chestnut and black in the high sun. Harry recognized the one who led them, the powerful male called Bone.

He started to call out a greeting, but they didn't return it. Harry tensed. Bone had a set expression on his face that might mean trouble. Harry didn't know why the centaurs would have cause to be angry at him, but he prepared to defend himself, his pack, and the northern goblins anyway.

Bone halted with a crash about twenty feet away from him. Then he shouted, "Ave!" and reared. When he came down, it was in a kneel, his front legs tucked underneath him. The other centaurs followed suit, kneeling in a wave, and Harry wondered if it was possible to die from embarrassment.

He cleared his throat. "Bone, thank you, but—you can rise."

Bone looked up at him. "We come to you as soldiers," he said. "That is how centaurs greet their commander."

"Oh." Harry blinked. "I—of course." He realized they would have to amend the attack on the Ministry to include the centaurs. "And you don't mind the wizarding world finding out about your freedom, either?" he asked faintly.

"Of course not," said Bone. "The stars spoke. It is time."

Harry nodded. Then Camellia cried out again, almost a howl, and Harry turned sharply. Something was coming through the wards,

something for which they parted like water, and something so big that even Woodhouse took notice, because of the way the feet made its earth shake.

He saw the horn first, black and corkscrew. It nudged aside two trees, and then the creature emerged fully into view, shaking out its coat, which was the creamy-white color of a polar bear's. Its feet ended in multiple hooves each, and it stood the size of a rhino. Harry found it hard to meet the eyes, which were as deep as oil wells. When it stepped into the open and he could see every inch of it, he realized the tail was a lion's, whippy and crowned with a puff of white hair, not a horse's.

A unicorn, but what a unicorn. Harry knew the creature, though he had only seen it once, in a vision Fawkes had shown him. Fawkes had flown around the world, singing to the magical creatures of their vates, and this unicorn had heard him in Africa. A karkadann; its name meant "lord of the desert." It was as vicious and violent as the unicorns Harry had freed from the Forbidden Forest were gentle. Harry knew ancient Muggles had seen karkadanns battling with elephants, before wizards had decided to lock them away for their own protection.

"How did one get free?" he whispered.

Bone started to answer, but the karkadann bugled at the sound of his voice, and the sound was a shrill trumpet that set Harry's heart on fire, a true battle-call. He held out his hand, and the unicorn trotted towards him, each foot coming down with a thump that jolted everyone except the centaurs. It halted next to him and tilted its head down to stare.

Harry met its gaze as best he could. The karkadann stared at him for long moments, then blew out its breath. Harry gasped. The breath was sweet and hot and sandy, and smelled of corpses rotting in the sun. And it affected Harry more profoundly than even the trumpet had, filling him with visions of fighting and defending and killing those who would try to kill him.

His magic soared up in answer. The karkadann shook its—no, Harry realized, her—horn in satisfaction, and snorted. Then she turned away to begin a patrol of the valley, following the general direction of the current of magic.

“That is one piece of news we carry,” Bone said, after each of them had spent several breathless moments watching her. “The webs are beginning to melt, vates, just a little.”

Harry turned to stare at him. “What?”

Bone nodded, eyes large and serious. “Yes. The stars sang of it as a sign of a true vates existing in the world. Unicorns run where they will; there are reports of a ki-lin abroad in China again, for the first time in centuries. The nundus are straining at their webs in Africa. Dragons are hatching in greater clutches, and more of them are surviving. And now and then, if they intend to join in a battle for more than just food or territory, a single member of a species may slip free of its web altogether.” Bone led his gaze to the karkadann. She was grazing now, though every few moments she ripped her head up and stared around self-importantly, to foil any enemies that might be sneaking up on her.

“I’ve never heard of that,” Harry said. “I—all the books I read on vates said nothing about this.”

“It is true,” said Bone. “It has not happened in centuries, and when it did, it was probably at a time when the wizarding communities were not interconnected and could not know that the various, scattered rebellions added up to one great pattern. And, of course, the knowledge of what a vates is has retreated and been kept alive mostly by the magical creatures.”

Harry shivered. “So it doesn’t matter that I’m only in one country in the world?”

“It would not if you were only a Lord-level wizard,” said Bone. “But you are a vates. So the freedom you spread encourages freedom. Many of the ancient webs were tied to each other for reinforcement, and almost surely, as some of them begin to fall, that unravels the

edges of others. And the unicorns.” For a moment, he smiled. “The stars say the unicorns are running, and where a truly free being of Light is, compulsions cannot hold. For every unicorn who chooses to run through Australia, a bunyip stirs, and for every one who chooses southern America, the old sleeping jaguars hear. Surely you did not think they would have no effect?”

“I suppose I thought they would keep to themselves,” said Harry, overwhelmed. “They seemed to want to when I set them free.”

“They go where they will,” said Bone. “The world is awakening again, vates. Not all as a result of you, not all as a result of your choice, but as a result of choices on choices, the unending building of them.”

Harry struggled to regulate his breathing. “It’s going to cross over into the Muggle world eventually, isn’t it?”

Bone simply inclined his head.

Harry closed his eyes. For a moment, he caught a glimpse of what he’d started, of what it might mean for Muggles to live in a world where unicorns were a reality, of how dangerous it might be, of what wars it would start—

And of the fact that he couldn’t stop this now without putting the unicorns back under a web, which he was not going to do.

He opened his eyes and nodded, the vision fading. “Whatever comes, I am ready to face it,” he said.

The karkadann reared abruptly, towering against the morning, and bugled again. Harry wondered who heard it, and what it made them think of.

Draco closed his eyes. He was leaning against a pillow in the bed he and Harry had shared as little as three days ago. It felt too empty, too big.

He was in the bed with the curtains drawn around him, hiding him, the only Slytherin sixth-year boy left. No one was here to see him. The door was locked. He did not have to feel alone if he did not want to.

But he did.

And at the same time, he was once again standing on the mountaintop, exposed unforgivably to all eyes. The moment he made his decision and moved, then people would know. He could not remain in this comfortable limbo forever.

Draco snorted. Comfortable? It's been anything but comfortable. I didn't ever wish to know that much about myself.

But he'd investigated, and made the lists in his head, and thought about what he would lose and what he would gain with either side, and confronted the fact that he wasn't ready—yet—to give up the belief that purebloods were superior, and thought about how it would affect his mother, and still there was only one decision he could make.

This isn't about what my parents think, or what my peers will. They'll think whatever they wish. I can affect it, but I can't control it.

This is about what I want.

And what I want, more than anything else, is to be myself. Strong, dignified, proud, powerful. I won't be that if I continue to let my father think he controls me. I'll only be waiting for some day of proving that never comes, like Harry's brother, or his father.

I want respect. I want love. I want people to gaze at me and envy, not what I have, but what I am.

I want Harry, not least because he's the one who can help me achieve all that.

Draco opened his eyes and nodded, then tapped his left wrist. Phoenix song warbled for long moments before Harry's distracted, sleepy voice said, "Hmm? What is it? Connor?"

Perhaps he thought only his brother would have been rude enough to speak to him near midnight. Draco didn't care about the rudeness, though. "Harry," he said.

He could hear Harry waking up, the pause between his reply and Harry's answer enough time to consider implications. Then Harry said, poised and strained and tense, "Draco."

"I'm coming to you," Draco said. "Tell me where you are."

"You've made the decision on your own?" Harry asked carefully. So carefully, trying not to step on anyone else's will. Draco was glad that he was not a vates.

"Yes."

"You know that it might mean—Draco, your father and I quarreled," said Harry bluntly. "I don't know for sure if he'd want you to stay away from me, but I think he probably will."

"He told me to stay away," said Draco. "I told him I understood. He took that to mean I'd agreed. Sometimes, he forgets I'm a Slytherin, too."

"Draco—" Harry's voice was on the edge of upset, now.

"I chose," said Draco. "This is about what I want, Harry. Tell me where you are. Now."

"I'm dropping the wards," Harry whispered. "We're in Woodhouse. If you touch the Portkey bracelet, it should take you to me."

Nodding, Draco climbed out of bed and scooped up his packed trunk. Argutus, lying on top of it, stirred sleepily. Draco was sure that Harry hadn't meant to leave him behind, but that was what had happened. Draco intended to correct that mistake. Really, he reflected as he gazed at the packed trunk, his decision had been made even before he got into bed. "Now?"

“Now,” Harry confirmed, and there was a crack in his voice through which Draco heard joy.

Draco touched the bracelet of magic on his wrist that would transport him to Harry’s side, unless there were powerful wards in the way. Since so many of the locations where Harry stayed were powerfully warded, it was often less than useful, but this time it worked, tugging him and the trunk and Argutus through a whirl of colors and landing them all in a bedroom. Argutus crawled out of the way, probably uttering complaints Draco couldn’t understand.

Harry waited on the other side of the room, near the bed, his eyes wide. He was still dressed in robes, crumpled though they were from sleeping in them. He stared straight into Draco’s face, and Draco waited.

Then Harry let out a loud sound neither sob nor cheer, and crossed the distance between them faster than Draco thought physically possible. His hand latched in Draco’s hair, his handless arm wrapping fiercely around his waist, and then he tilted Draco’s head back and kissed him as if he’d been starving for it.

Yes, Draco thought, smugness settling in his belly as he kissed back. This is what I want. This is what I deserve.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Jailbreak

Harry woke in a flood of early morning sunlight. He blinked for a moment, wondering why on earth Tonks or someone else hadn't shaken him awake with the dawn, and then realized the warm weight in his arms might have something to do with that.

Shifting, he raised himself on one elbow and looked down at Draco.

Draco slept on his left side, the soft snores that he always denied making emerging from his mouth and nose in little puffs of air. That, in turn, stirred his hair, which stuck up around his face in tiny independent clumps. Harry stared at him for a long moment, then closed his eyes and swallowed.

He had hoped that Draco would choose to come to his side. He had even hoped it would happen without his having to ask, because he did not know what to say in the face of Lucius's opposition. To force Draco to choose between his family and Harry was intolerably cruel.

And now Draco was here, and had chosen, and had explained, last night before they both fell asleep, all his reasons for doing so. The reasons quieted every objection that Harry might have raised against his presence, except for the sorrow that would result for Lucius when he found out.

Harry would have made himself survive if Draco had chosen otherwise, he knew. Transforming every pain, every irritant, every impatience into determination to win this battle had worked for him in the last few days, and was working now. And he would not have shown Draco what he felt; he would have wanted him to be happy, and his boyfriend's brooding would have made him unhappy.

Now, though, Harry could lean his head down until his cheek rested on Draco's, a gesture he wouldn't have dared with Draco awake, and breathe, "Thank Merlin you chose this. I needed you so much."

He closed his eyes and lay there in the sunlight, feeling warmth close around them from above and below.

Lucius was concentrating so intently on a spell that might be just the thing to curb Rhangnara's ambition that he started when the phoenix song warbled. He clenched one hand on the book to keep from dropping it and glared at his left wrist. It went on singing, however, so Lucius forced his voice smooth and asked, "What is it?"

"Father."

Draco's voice, smug in the way that it was when he won a game. Lucius only felt a renewed surge of irritation. Draco knew his morning routine. He should have known better than to interrupt Lucius during the hour that he used for studying spells and writing correspondence.

"Draco," he said. "What is it? Has something happened?" Harry might do any number of mad things in his distraction. Lucius would write a letter for Julius to take to the Department of Mysteries when they occurred, of course, so that the madness would be controlled and contained. The boy needed more guidance than Lucius had ever suspected he did, when he still thought of Harry as someone he could follow without complaint. He was like a wild horse who resisted breaking to the rein.

"You could say that," Draco said, and his voice dripped with self-satisfaction now. Lucius felt his curiosity peak. Whatever it was must have been very good news, and perhaps that was why Draco had interrupted him, because he could not wait to share it.

"Out with it," said Lucius, marking his place in the book of mind-control spells with a peacock feather quill and leaning back.

"I looked carefully at all my options, Father, and made a choice I've been putting off for far too long," Draco began, his voice subtly mocking. Lucius frowned lightly. It must have been self-mockery; Draco saw now that the choice really was simple. That probably means the news is not as momentous as I hoped. "I wanted to let you know at once that I'd made it, of course. As of this moment forward, by your own words, you no longer have an heir."

Lucius felt the breath in his throat turn to frost. His left hand clenched over the arm of his chair until there came a warning creak of wood. "What did you say?" he whispered.

"You heard me." Draco's voice took on a lazy drawl. He has never sounded more like me, Lucius thought, even while he fought to keep his feet in a suddenly reeling world. "You threatened to disown me if I chose Harry's rebellion. And now I am sitting in the same house as Harry, eating the same breakfast, after having slept in the same bed last night. When one chooses a side, it's always best to do it thoroughly, don't you agree?"

And those last words alone were a slap at Lucius, who had always sought to keep his options open, and danced on both Harry's and the Dark Lord's sides for as long as possible. He would not show it, however. Now he was grateful that the communication spells had no visual component, so Draco could not see him clamping his teeth together.

"You will have no money from me, Draco, until you renounce this madness and come back home," he told his son. "You will have no sanctuary in our Manor. You will have no help from those who call themselves friends of the Malfoys."

"Oh, I knew all that," said Draco.

The careless manner in which he said it further infuriated Lucius. "And what do you think this will do to your mother?" he asked. "Your standing among the pureblood circles? Your reputation as a wizard?"

"Mother is the only one of those I regret staining with my defiance," said Draco. "You may tell her yourself, if you like, as I can't imagine that you'll keep this quiet. And she did not raise a son who would cower tamely in front of his father." His voice changed cadences, to taunting. "Really, Father, I only said that I understood your request to keep away from Harry, not that I would obey it."

Lucius, lost in an icestorm of anger and frustration, did not allow himself to lament that mistake. It had been understandable. "You will regret this decision yet, Draco," he whispered.

"I don't think so, Father," said Draco. "A wise woman told me over the summer that I wasn't as much like you as I was like Mother, and I see now that she was right. You would never have defied your father if he made you choose between him and Mother, would you have? But that doesn't matter. I'm with Harry now. I weighed my choice, figured out all the consequences of it, and still chose. I have what I want to make me happy. I imagine you can't say the same."

The communication spell ended. Lucius sat where he was for a long moment, staring at the wall and pointedly not shaking.

Then he stood and went to the hearth to firecall his solicitor. He would not speak to Narcissa about Draco's disownment until he could present it to her as a *fait accompli*. She would be on his side, of course, because they had raised their son to act a certain way and he was not acting it, but she might still protest such a step. Lucius would ease her pain as best he could.

"Our first goal is to keep the people we rescue from Tullianum alive." Harry said, leaning forward over the table, his hand splayed flat on the surface and his eyes traveling from face to face. "Not to kill Unspeakables. Not to weaken the Ministry. Not to gather information that will be useful for a later attack on the Ministry, as I hope that we won't have to do this again. Is that understood?"

Draco looked from person to person, and saw them all nodding. He concealed a smirk behind his hand. There were many more wizards than had been there this morning. A short argument with Harry, just before Draco had called his father to talk to Lucius about the terms of his disownment, had revealed that Harry was waiting to call on his allies because he wanted to give them time to make up their minds—and, Draco thought, because he was afraid that more of them would act like Lucius if he "took them for granted." Draco had trounced this supposition quite quickly, by pointing out that at least some of them were probably waiting anxiously for Harry's call, not wanting to interrupt in case he was doing something important, and unable to simply Apparate to his side because they had no idea where he was.

Harry had blinked and muttered, and then started using the communication spell to talk to his allies, most of whom responded just as eagerly as Draco had thought they would. He'd shaken his head and rolled his eyes, though he'd been careful not to let Harry see him do it. Sometimes, Harry forgot which way the balance of power tilted. And his assumption that people who would help him in war against Voldemort wouldn't want to help him in a rebellion against the Ministry, or a rebellion undertaken because of werewolves, was, frankly, laughable.

The Bulstrodes were here now, all four, though of course Millicent's little sister, Marian, was bedded down for a nap. Syrinx, Owen, and Michael had finished Apparating an hour after Harry had spoken to them. Thomas Rhangnara and his eldest two children had appeared with pops that sounded gleeful to Draco's ears. Ignifer Apollonis stood stern and tall next to Honoria Pemberley, who would not stop whispering with Tybalt Starrise and his Muggleborn partner. (Draco was proud of himself for thinking the term Muggleborn instead of Mudblood). Delilah Gloryflower was there too, the bells in her hair shaking as she bent over the map. Moody, Draco's changeable halfblood cousin, and the goblins and those few centaurs who could fit into the room, as well as those werewolves who would be helping with the attack, were scattered here and there amongst them.

Draco told himself he was not ashamed that he was the only person bearing the name of Malfoy in the room, and put the thought away as Harry took a step back from the table. Harry's eyes were brilliant with determination, his face so set that Draco thought swords would have broken on him. He didn't seem aware of the fact that people were so fixated on him, or he would have been blushing and stammering. Of course, Draco thought, Harry did his best as a leader when he thought about what he had to accomplish, and not what he meant to the people who followed him. He would never have believed it, anyway.

"We'll be waiting to Apparate until we're outside the Ministry," he was saying now. "The anti-Apparition wards are simply too strong for most of us to tear, a few people excepted." His gaze lingered on Apollonis and Adalrico Bulstrode, Draco noticed. "And then I'll need as many people as possible to take as many werewolves as possible in Side-

Along Apparitions. We don't have time to get a detailed explanation of Woodhouse to their ears."

"Is the karkadann coming?" asked one of the goblins, one Draco thought was female, with ornaments of bronze and gold gleaming from her wrists.

Harry shook his head. "She'll remain here to guard Woodhouse, along with some of the pack and a few centaurs, of course." His gaze turned to the tall centaur Draco thought was named Bone, or something else ridiculously simple. "I know that your people cannot Apparate. What—"

Bone laughed, his eyes shining. "We have our own ways of getting from place to place," he said. "Do not fear that. Now that our web has changed and our magic is free, the wizarding world shall learn it again." He folded his arms over his chest and gave a stern nod. Draco concealed a shiver, as best he could. He had grown up on stories of centaur rampages and what they could mean for wizards.

"What about those who get in our way?" Honoria asked, loudly.

All eyes focused on Harry. His expression never wavered, though, and Draco had to wonder if he'd underestimated him.

"Our primary purpose is still rescuing the werewolves," he said. "And by the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, causing excess fear is immoral. That means I don't want you going out of the way to seek Ministry people to murder."

They waited. Everyone had known that, Draco thought. The difficult part, the other part, was what they were waiting for Harry to talk about.

Harry let out a harsh breath. "Our primary purpose is rescuing the werewolves," he repeated. "And those who deliberately put themselves in the way of that have lost their right to simply depart, lives intact. Use defensive magic as long as you can, but defend your own lives and the lives of the pack first. If it has to be done, kill them."

A profound silence followed in the wake of Harry's words, and Draco noticed that the faces of all in attendance were solemn. He knew why a moment later.

Acting against the Ministry was one thing; even breaking werewolves out of jail could win them the silent applause of some in the Ministry who stood against the anti-werewolf laws in secret. But killing the Ministry's people would bring them to the brink of open war.

Harry could have evaded that by commanding his people to avoid killing at all costs. He clearly wasn't going to.

Draco took a deep breath and shook his head, feeling a shock travel through him rivaled only by the shock he'd had that morning when he saw the karkadann. Things were changing.

Lucius looked over the last of the documents his solicitor had handed through the Floo connection, and nodded. He reached out and picked up the quill, holding it for a moment over that last line.

He need only sign, and Draco would be disowned.

It was not permanent, of course, because Lucius did not believe Draco's little fit of teenage rebellion was permanent. When Draco realized what it really meant to be alone in the world, separated from his parents, from his name, from everything that made him who he really was, then he would give in. He could not want to be at Harry's side only, Lucius knew. No Malfoy was content to remain in the shadow of another for long. If the Dark Lord's reign had lasted, Lucius Malfoy would have carved himself out a separate name. Draco, however, had no reason to think that Harry would give him position and power and prestige over others. In the end, he would withdraw from his lover because he could not be his own person while Harry overshadowed him. He would have to return to his father and build on the family name to become a power, as every Malfoy for the last ten generations had.

Lucius brought the quill down, and signed. It was only a temporary cut. His son would come to his senses and return. Being in the bed of a Lord-level wizard was not enough to make up for lost money and

lost connection, in a world such as theirs where connection was so important.

That done, Lucius bundled the documents back through the Floo connection and went to tell Narcissa.

Harry appeared at the Ministry entrance with most of his human and goblin allies clustered around him, but invisible under Honoria's illusions. Harry spent a moment studying the glamours, wishing he knew how to make them. They shimmered like Invisibility Cloaks, adjusting themselves to their surroundings. In moments, Harry could no longer see his allies, but only the dirty and graffiti-covered alley.

He took a deep breath, and knew he was studying the glamours and how to make them just in order to put this off. He turned to the broken telephone box and pushed the sequence of numbers corresponding to M-A-G-I-C that would let him in.

Nothing happened. No voice, welcoming or otherwise, spoke. Harry narrowed his eyes slightly, then shrugged and stepped away, focusing on the telephone box.

"Modero," he said.

The magic surged through him and, following the path of his will, grabbed at the magic around the telephone box. Harry felt a moment when the Ministry's wards grappled with him, trying to retain control of it. But he repeated the spell, and the box was ripped away. Harry nodded and stepped into it, feeling Draco, Owen, Michael, and Syrinx crowd in behind him; they had agreed those four should go with him first, no matter what happened. The lift slid downward, moving more smoothly than he remembered it doing, and deposited them in the Atrium.

They stepped out to the shrill jangle of alarms. Harry smiled sourly, even as he made the lift rise again to start bringing down the rest of his allies. Well, he had hardly expected to enter quietly. Even tearing apart the Ministry's anti-Apparition wards and appearing much closer to Tullianum—which he'd decided against doing because most of his allies weren't strong enough to do it, so Harry would have had to

make multiple trips Side-Along Apparating them—would have caused panic, and probably louder alarms.

The only person in the Atrium at the moment was the checkpoint wizard, who was gaping at them, or, presumably, at him, since Harry was the only one visible. Harry had insisted on that. He hoped at least a few people who might otherwise oppose their mission would stand aside when they saw him, knowing they couldn't face his magic.

Not so the checkpoint wizard. He leveled his wand at Harry and tried to squeak out some sort of challenge.

Harry took a deep breath and dropped all the barriers on his magic that he could, retaining only the one path of focus necessary to get the lift up to the surface of the alley. His power filled the Atrium like a rising tide, sloshing all over the walls and the fountain and the checkpoint wizard. From behind him, Harry heard a half-drunken giggle, and knew it was Draco. He tended to get like that when Harry released his magic fully. Harry still didn't know why.

The checkpoint wizard's eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed in a dead faint. Harry shrugged and moved forward, eyes fastened on the gates beyond him. One less person to fight.

And then the gates opened, and out poured a flood of wizards in dark robes, moving with a battle-trained precision that Harry recognized. Aurors.

He felt a glimmer of magic from behind him, and a tiny mote of light darted towards the Aurors. Syrinx, Harry knew; he doubted Draco or either of the Rosier-Henlin twins would have used Light magic. The Aurors, busy arraying themselves into a battle line, didn't notice as the tiny mote divided into many parts, one for each of them, and drifted up to hover in the corners of their eyes.

They sure as hell noticed when each mote grew into a sunrise, though, blinding them and sending them sprawling backwards, clawing at their faces. Harry glanced over his shoulder and nodded, to let Syrinx know he was proud. Behind them, the lift landed with another load of their allies.

Harry faced the gates and began walking over and between the sprawled Aurors. Everyone who was actually entering the Ministry had memorized the map of Tullianum, and knew how to get there. Besides, with Harry going in front of them, the wards should be broken by the time they reached it, and the hidden prison revealed. Narcissa knew what Lucius would say to her, when he arrived. She had known from his low, furious voice through the door this morning what had happened. She hadn't heard the conversation, but she didn't need to. Draco had made the choice she always suspected he would, and now the only thing that remained was to go and join him.

Her trunk was packed. She had on a gown that Lucius should recognize, since she had worn it the day when they heard of Sirius's final strike against his abusive parents. Subtle gray, accented with silver on the sleeves and the skirt, it spoke of a great wrong done by one's own family, and the wearer of the gown having the strength to endure and mourn the wrong.

Lucius would recognize it the moment he came through the door into her room, and Narcissa knew one of two things would happen then. She was hoping that she need only stand, hold Lucius's eyes, turn, and Apparate. She could pass out through the wards of Malfoy Manor as Lucius's wife, and she had checked; the wards on Grimmauld Place were still open to welcome her. Regulus had arranged that exception before he left, and Harry had never sought to end it.

She waited.

Rufus stood straight as every alarm in his office, it seemed, began to shrill. These were alarms he hadn't installed, and Fudge hadn't either; they were old, meant to warn the Minister that the Ministry's entrances were under attack. Rufus reached for his wand, wondering if it was Death Eaters, or werewolves determined to free their pack members, or perhaps Dionysus Hornblower, who had tried this more than once—

And then he felt the wash and sweep of magic from below. A Lord-level wizard was in the Ministry, and his power rose, flooding the rooms, destroying the wards, hitting those who would try to fight him

and making a good portion of them cower and whimper in fear. The power did not have the tainted edge that Rufus knew from viewing the left-over remnants of Voldemort's spells, and he didn't think Falco Parkinson, whom the Liberator had warned him about, would try a strike like this, not when he was committed to cautious movement and watchful observance.

That left only one person.

And now he heard the unspoken Not yet on the heels of Harry's promise that he wouldn't invade Tullianum, and damned himself for a fool.

"What is it, sir?" Percy's voice was nearly as shrill as one of the ringing wards, and Rufus reminded himself that the boy was still very young, a trainee Auror.

"Harry," said Rufus, which explained it all, really. He reached into his desk drawer, pulling out a ring of gray metal that contained an old signet in the shape of a flowering rose, and tossed it to Percy. Percy fumbled, but caught it, and stared at him, looking confused. "Go to Burke," Rufus commanded. "Now. Show her that ring. The Aurors are bound to obey me and not Bones in a situation like this. She'll know what this means. Now," he stressed, when Percy went on blinking.

Percy stood straight then, nodded, and ran madly out of the room. Rufus slid his wand into its holster, gathered one more object from his drawer, and stepped out of his office, nodding to the two Aurors who waited on guard.

"You're with me," he said. "Sworn to secrecy, of course. I'll know who talked about this if anyone did, and gut 'em. You understand me?"

Both of them nodded, eyes wide with something between fear and battle-joy. Rufus reached out and slapped the flat piece of stone he held against the wall. Not all the Ministers had used this set of defenses, because not all Ministers had been battle-trained. But Rufus was, and he intended to defend his ground and his people.

Magic embedded in the walls shimmered and hissed in response to the touch of the stone plaque—place magic, based on spells woven in when the building was constructed. Rufus didn't think any modern wizard would know how to weave them, and that was a true pity. The stones ground aside, and opened up a steep descent, something between a staircase and a chute. Numbers along the walls marked where various floors were. Rufus nodded. He would go to the tenth level and wait there. Better than running madly all over the Ministry trying to catch Harry.

Rufus had no doubt that Harry was making for the prison, to free as many werewolves as possible. He forced himself, however, to strip the emotions from that idea, and only consider it as part of battle tactics. It didn't matter that he was facing a man he would have been proud to consider a leader and a friend. What mattered was that he was facing a man making for Tullianum.

His bad leg did not bother him as he went rapidly downstairs. On his way to battle, it almost never did.
The door opened.

Narcissa stood. Lucius was entering with an expression on his face that was the closest thing he could come to gentle, and which he wouldn't have used if there were anyone to see, including house elves. He must have banished them from this part of the Manor. He had bad news to tell her, said the look in his eyes, but he hoped that they would be the stronger for it.

He saw her. He saw the gown. He stopped. Narcissa had never seen him judder to a stop before. She did not think she was ever likely to see it again, so she appreciated it while she could.

She stood there a moment more, letting him absorb the message of the colors and the packed trunk, and the fact that she considered it was he who had done the wrong and not Draco, and then turned, stooping to reach for the trunk.

Lucius's snarl behind her, harsh and low, told her that he was not going to take the dignified way out after all.

Harry had seized control of the lifts as he had the telephone box, commandeering them all to transport his allies to the level below the Department of Mysteries, where Tullianum's entrance was located. The people who had been riding the lifts had given them skittish looks and piled off at once, meaning that the bulk of his allies had reached the bottom with no casualties, except the blinded Aurors in the Atrium. Harry was cautiously pleased.

Granted, they had only gone down two floors, since the Atrium was on the eighth, but Harry was still hopeful.

He stepped out of the lift onto the tenth level, and found a stiff wind of resistance meeting his magic. This close, the presence of the Stone was overwhelming. Harry could feel it like the throb of a living heart—or, no, since many small shocks ran through it, perhaps the throb of a living brain was closest. He shook his head and glanced over his shoulder. Honoria had lifted the illusions, so that they could see who was there and not there, and wouldn't bump into each other. She did circle overhead as a gull, though, ready to cast more illusions as they were needed.

Moody was missing, of course. Moody had explained that while his contacts trusted him, they were reluctant to show their entrances to the Ministry to anyone else, so they would cause havoc elsewhere while Harry and his allies went for the prison. They had provided the current signal that would unlock the room where the prisoners' wands were located, which neither Moody nor Tonks had known, since it was changed every few days. Harry had considered asking how Moody's allies had known it, and then decided not to.

The centaurs were not present, any of them. Bone had continued to smile when Harry asked him what was going to happen, except for mentioning the centaur office in the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures. In the end, Harry had given up and accepted that the centaurs would serve as another distraction.

And Thomas, of course, had his own reasons for coming along. Harry was content to leave him to them.

He faced forward. They were in a dimly-lit hallway of dark stone, similar to the dungeons at Hogwarts, but absolutely dry. Harry snorted. When he first came here with Dumbledore, to watch the vote of no confidence for Fudge, Dumbledore had told him there was no way to reach the tenth level except through the ninth. But both Tonks and Moody had insisted otherwise, and when he had asked the lifts to drop further than the ninth level, they'd done so. So much for secrets that only the Hogwarts Headmaster is supposed to know.

He took a step forward.

The ceiling above them opened, and dozens of tiny glass globes laden with the time-reversing dust that Harry recognized from the attack on the Hogwarts Express fell out.

Narcissa shook her sleeve, and her wand fell into her hand. She turned to face Lucius, holding it, and surprised him again, as the sight of the gown had. He'd taken a single step forward, his own wand already out, lips open in the incantation for the Body-Bind, but he paused when he saw her readiness.

His expression remained surprised after a few moments, even though Narcissa thought it should have changed back by now. After all, he was the one who had started this, had turned this into a duel instead of letting her Apparate away and thinking on his mistakes. She wondered that he thought she was unprepared to face him.

They hadn't dueled with spells since the early years of their courtship. That didn't matter. They had dueled countless times since then, with words and silences and gestures and the way they raised their son. This was only a return to what had been, the eternal blaze of a wheel spinning round.

Lucius found his voice then, and not in a curse. "Why, Narcissa?"

"Do you remember," Narcissa asked him softly, "the question that you put to me on Draco's first birthday?"

He did. Of course he did. Her husband did not forget things like that. His face went blank again, and Narcissa approved. Lucius had made

several stupid mistakes in the past few days, but she would truly have worried if he could not have regained his self-control.

“I joked,” Lucius said.

“I didn’t,” said Narcissa. “I always tell you the truth, Lucius, somehow. You are the one who chose not to see it.”

He stood where he was, motionless as a sleeping portrait, and watched her. Narcissa waited. The tension in the room washed over them like the tension before a building storm, and she could see Lucius’s muscles coiling in response to it.

Narcissa didn’t joke about things like this. Lucius had asked her what would happen if she ever had to choose between her husband and her son, and Narcissa had told him she would choose her son. He had kissed her, laughing, and then they had put Draco into the cot and gone to bed themselves. Narcissa had assumed he had listened to her.

He had not, and underneath everything else Narcissa felt a stir of irritation. Lucius was prone to value his own opinion above those of others, but this was ridiculous, not thinking his wife was an equal partner in their marriage, with a will as strong as his own.

And so it had come to this—not because Narcissa or Draco had done anything, not at root, but because Lucius’s pride had blinded him to truths he should always have acknowledged as true.

Appropriately, Lucius cast the first spell.

Harry felt his mind go blank, but the emotion there was neither surprise nor shock. It might have been rage.

“Modero,” he intoned, as he had with the telephone box, and the globes clustered into a delicate mass and flew at him. Harry held up his hand and controlled their flight. They didn’t shatter, but hovered around him, shimmering delicately in the dim light. Harry stared into them, and saw that, unbroken, the dust twirled through shining patterns that had nothing to do with gravity. He shook his head.

Then he lifted his head. The pulses of the Stone were singing again, and Merlin knew what it would command the Unspeakables to do next, now that this first trap hadn't worked.

Harry took a deep breath and opened his absorbere gift. He hadn't been planning to do this, since their first purpose was rescuing the werewolves, but now he didn't care any longer. If the Department of Mysteries was going to attack them from above and behind, he would give them something else to think about.

He drank the magic from the globes, which made the dust stop sparkling and settle into useless rubbish on the bottom of the glass. He drank the power from the chutes that had opened to drop the baubles, and reached behind them, towards a store of rich magic that had nothing to do with the Stone. He swallowed and gulped and absorbed, and he felt himself ring with power, growing swollen with it. He was draining artifacts he had never seen, and he did not care. The whole purpose of this was to put the Unspeakables on the defensive, and make them more concerned with protecting their precious Department than attacking one individual.

He felt the Unspeakables begin to react; the Stone's pulses changed direction and grew more urgent. Harry grabbed some of the magic he'd swallowed and sent it flowing in a massive slap into the Department of Mysteries. Hopefully, that would be enough to knock the Unspeakables silly.

Then he faced the door that Moody's contacts said hid the prisoners' wands. There was a ward keyed to a password covering it, and a strong enough one that Harry would ordinarily have been glad to have the password. Now, though, he was practically bloated with the magic he'd swallowed, and most of that magic had to do with time.

He released it in a narrow beam at the wooden door. The door promptly began to age, the wood turning into puffs of harmless dust that curled around each other and blew away. The room beyond appeared, a neat set of shelves stacked with wand-cases, and showed two Aurors scrambling to their feet, breathless with surprise.

Harry looked them in the eye and said, “I want to know where the wand of every werewolf you’ve put in Tullianum is. That includes Hawthorn Parkinson, and your former comrades from the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts.” When they hesitated, he used his magic to deepen his voice. “Now.”

The walls trembled. The Aurors nodded and began to work, one of them pulling wand-cases off the shelves while another flipped through notes on the table, probably to look up names and descriptions she didn’t know off the top of her head.

Harry caught a glimpse of a door opening in the side of his vision—further down the corridor, towards the hidden entrance to Tullianum. He turned sharply just as the Minister stepped into view.

Narcissa spun aside from the Cage Curse, and dropped to one knee beyond the table that she usually used to write her correspondence. Sometimes, she had considered telling Lucius about all the traps she’d built into the furniture in this room, and then she had put aside the notion. A woman must be allowed to have her little secrets, her mother had told her once.

Narcissa used one of them now, brushing her fingers along a carved dragon on the table leg.

There was a click, and several holes opened along the table’s legs and rim and underside, firing a series of tiny silver darts at Lucius. He had to move his wand fast to deal with them, and in the meantime Narcissa seated herself on the table, legs crossed and swinging idly, wand braced on a knee.

It was one thing to best Lucius in a duel. It was another to make him realize he had lost. She would not do that unless she managed to trounce him with composure, and not only with magic.

Lucius finished off the last of the darts. Narcissa aimed her wand at him and murmured, “*Acclaro iactata.*”

There was nothing Lucius Malfoy did hate more than showing his emotions.

Thomas had seen the young red-haired wizard duck into the Head Auror's office and then out again, but he hadn't removed the glamour on himself. Nor had he done anything when other Aurors began to rush from behind their desks, milling around like bees with ants invading their hive before they organized and marched out. He waited until the door to her office actually opened from the inside, and then he stepped forward, dropped the glamour, put himself in the way, and smiled at her.

"Hello, Priscilla," he said.

His wife halted in mid-stride. Thomas studied her, rejoicing, as always, in the way she looked. She was taller than he was, and her blonde hair hung to her shoulders, and her face was stern and neutral. Well, not entirely neutral, not right now. She expressed enough shock at seeing him, Merlin knew.

"Thomas," she whispered.

Thomas nodded. "I'm here with Harry," he said. "A lot of us are here with Harry, in fact, including some goblins. Did you know that a vates destroys webs just by being around them? But the goblins' web he broke under his own power. The northern goblins are free again, Priscilla. We're living in the middle of a new age." He cocked his head and smiled. "I always wanted to study history, and now I'm living it. That's much more exciting."

Priscilla stared over his shoulder, as if she expected the Minister himself to come marching up between the desks and scold her for taking a moment to talk with her husband. "Thomas, I can't stay," she said. "I—someone invaded the Ministry—" And then she stopped, doubtless realizing who had invaded the Ministry, and put a hand to her mouth. Her eyes, staring at him, became wet.

Thomas reached out and patted her hand. "We hardly expect you to take wing and follow us, my dear," he said. He was sad to see Priscilla so distressed, so torn. He'd wanted to come and talk to her, make sure she knew that even though they were on opposite sides now, he didn't blame her. How could he? She had been appointed

Head Auror long before the Ministry had passed its ridiculous, nonsensical rules against werewolves, and she couldn't have known that things would get this bad. "I won't ask you to call off the Aurors, either. I just wanted to talk to you and tell you about my own decisions. I've decided to remember that I'm Harry's ally first and foremost."

"Thomas," she said again, but this time there was a wealth of pain in her words.

Thomas leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. Priscilla turned her head away, and—was she crying? Thomas hadn't planned on that. He hadn't wanted that. He patted her arm in an awkward attempt at comfort. This choosing of free wills thing was obviously harder than it had looked when he'd seen Harry's Malfoy beaming at his side. He had thought that going to his wife and explaining his choice would be nobler than writing her a letter or leaving her to learn about it on her own. Now, though, she looked as though someone had taken a hot iron to her chest, and Thomas didn't feel much better himself. He wasn't sure if the pain was more like a hot iron or like someone hitting him with a heavy cudgel, however. He wondered how he could find out.

"I love you," he told her. "And I get to see a vates. And I'll understand anything the Minister has you do to the rebellion. Ministers don't tend to like being rebelled against, after all, or take it kindly. Don't be sorry for me, my dear. We are living in such interesting times."

He kissed her one more time, and then turned to go down to the fourth level, where the centaurs had said to meet them. Along the way, he decided that the pain was more like being slammed in the chest with a cudgel. Shock waves seemed to be passing through his body just under his ribs.

Lucius felt his wife's curse strike him, and snarled. He knew what it did, and he hated how he couldn't defend himself because the darts had put him off-balance just long enough for the curse to strike him.

A voice began to wail from the side of his head, the voice of the shock and pain he felt. Then another began to mutter in anger. So soft and heated were the words that only the names of Draco, Harry,

and Narcissa could occasionally be made out. And a third voice started crooning about its own stupidity.

Lucius knew his cheeks were flushing, that he was losing control of the impulse to shout at his wife. But how could she have done this? He had known she would understand that Draco's disownment was for the good of the family—and if she had not, why hadn't she come to him at once, so he could explain?

He always struck back when someone hurt him. Always. He had never considered what would happen if Narcissa hurt him, though.

He knew he should plan, and rationally determine the best course. But the betrayal was too great, and too sudden, and the muttering voices around him, showing off the emotions that he wanted to keep buried and controlled, didn't help.

Knowing he should hold back, but no more capable of doing so than of flying without a broom, Lucius whipped his wand sideways and cast a curse that would cause Narcissa's pretty skin to come up all boils. It would not ruin her beauty permanently, but the pain was sharp and stinging. He wanted to hear her scream.

Anything but have her sit there, legs crossed in the dove-gray gown trimmed with silver, quietly laughing, and aware of how very much more in control she was than he was, and having to consider, because of it, that perhaps he had been wrong to disown Draco.

Rufus saw Harry's stunned face turned towards him. He saw the people gathered around Harry in the narrow hallway, including Tonks, identifiable at once by the frizz of blue hair around her head, and goblins, goblins of all creatures, with bows and spears and glowing white chains in their hands.

He didn't allow himself to think about them. He knew Harry, and though he would never have wanted to use that knowledge to battle Harry, now that it had come to this, his wants had very little to do with it. He flicked his wand and intoned the spell that he had to use—nonverbal, of course. Harry would have stopped him at any cost if he heard him utter it.

Draco Malfoy spun out of the line of allies and towards Rufus, summoned by the urgent Accio. He stumbled twice, and once nearly regained his feet and resisted the magic, but the distance separating them was short, and Rufus grabbed his shoulder before he could break free. He laid his wand against Malfoy's throat, and to his credit the boy understood the threat and went limp and quiet. Rufus raised his eyes to Harry's and held them there.

Harry was ablaze. Magic ran around him in colored ripples, blue fading to green and then to indigo and fiery patterns that mimicked the colors of a phoenix. His face was unearthly, green eyes glowing with the force and fury of a suicidal fanatic's. Rufus saw enough power dripping from the end of his left arm to nearly form another hand there, perhaps, if he had paid attention to it.

Rufus took a deep breath of relief. He had managed to reach Harry before he freed anyone from Tullianum, or, in fact, did anything irreparable. And he understood Harry's weakness. So long as Malfoy was in his custody, Harry wasn't about to move against him. Rufus would never hurt the boy, of course, but he had no qualms about using him as a hostage to prevent this—this madness. Just the thought of what would happen if Harry broke the werewolves out of Tullianum was making his head reel.

"Harry—" he began.

Then someone pushed him out of his own head. It was so sudden that Rufus had no chance to resist. One moment he was in control of his body and the next he wasn't, sitting in a tiny prison cell in the very back of his mind. He felt his arm uncurl from around Malfoy's throat and the wand lift. Then he turned and calmly Stunned the two Aurors with him, adjusting Malfoy's body so that it didn't fall to the floor at the same time.

Then he lifted his wand and Stunned himself.

Rufus felt the invading presence leap and pass out of his ears, and then he was the one with the stiffening limbs, the ringing ears, the shriek of protest in his mind that did no good as he felt Malfoy open

his eyes and shake his head and step away from him. He did think he heard the presence, the possessing mind of Draco bloody Malfoy, chuckle.

Well he might chuckle, Rufus thought, before he fell and dimness claimed him. He had forgotten entirely about Malfoy's possession gift, which he'd heard the truth of from Malfoy's own lips, and he deserved everything that happened as a result of that.

Narcissa recognized the curse Lucius was using, and, more than anything, that made her sad. Lucius truly had lost control of himself. He probably imagined that she would hurt, and cry out, and then apologize in a little girl voice, and that would be the end of it. She wondered if he remembered that she had stopped being a good little girl a long time ago. In fact, she didn't think she'd been a girl since the first time she saw one of Bella's rages, long before she knew Lucius.

She dropped off the table, her gown tangling around her and incidentally providing a shield of sorts against any other curses that might come her way. She rolled along the floor, back towards her trunk and away from Lucius, and she heard him casting another curse. This one was a pain curse. Narcissa felt some relief. That one would make her scream like a woman, at least, and he flung it with a strength Bella would have approved of.

She lifted Protego, then flicked her wand towards the sound of the voices muttering about Lucius's emotions. She did not need her eyes to hurt him, and she used the Blood Whip, the curse that make shields explode, so Lucius would have to duck or have his throat ripped out. It was the reason she had spoken the incantation aloud. At the moment, lost in the depths of rage as he was, she could have killed him if she used the spell nonverbally and he had no idea what was coming, and she wanted him to know that, and know that she knew.

Narcissa sat up again, and found Lucius on his knees, panting, glaring at her. His blond hair was mussed, and the Blood Whip had hit him on the side of the neck after all, inflicting a long gash that would take some time to heal. Narcissa was surprised and disappointed that he had slipped that far. She shook her head.

“Regain your composure, Lucius,” she said softly. “Or I will start to think that you have no Malfoy pride left.”

He lashed his wand.

Narcissa’s eyes went dark, her hand went limp, and an invisible grasp grabbed her throat and began to squeeze.

Thomas met the chaos on the third floor. He started to see people running madly away from the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, all of them shrieking at the top of their lungs. He shook his head and wondered why. He would either be running towards something interesting, or trying to ambush it, and so crouching in one place with his voice silent and still. But then, people had always screamed too much, in his opinion.

A witch grabbed his shoulder and tried to drag him along with her. Thomas shrugged her off and turned to stare at her. She stared back, panting. She had dark hair that stuck up straight from the back of her head. Thomas was charmed. He knew from studying GUTOEKOM that that probably meant she had some trace of lightning magic, but he had only seen those kinds of people in dry words on a page, never met any in reality. He opened his mouth to ask her about her family history, but she interrupted him.

“Run!” she screamed in his face, and left Thomas blinking. There was no need to be rude, he thought, even if one was on the verge of panicking. “There are centaurs running up and down the corridors!”

Thomas brightened. So they had managed to find a way into the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures after all, just the way they had promised Harry they would. “How many?” he asked eagerly. “And do you know how they got there?”

The witch stared at him some more, while Thomas patiently waited for an answer to his question. Then she spat at his feet, said, “Fine, it’s your funeral,” and turned for the stairs, pushing him away. Thomas stepped back to let other people get past, and reached the bottom of the stairs with a little shrug.

When he poked his head into the Department, he grinned. Bone and three other centaurs, all palomino, were indeed galloping up and down the corridor, whooping and stabbing with their spears at the walls. Thomas wondered if anyone else had noticed the small white sparks that were flying from their hooves, indicative of magic. Probably not. A little danger was enough to make sure people never noticed the important things in life, unless they were research wizards.

He hailed Bone by name, and the centaur looked up at him and nodded, without ever stopping his steady gallop. His hooves shook the walls. Thomas listened, and realized there were many more hoofbeats than there should be, with this small a herd in the Ministry. He laughed.

"It's partly illusion, isn't it?" he asked, cupping his hands around his mouth to increase the power of his yell.

Bone nodded at him again. Thomas grinned in excitement. That fit directly into some of the GUTOEKOM theories that he had debated endlessly with Petrovitch. Petrovitch was one of those adherents to the idea that magical creature magic was fundamentally different from wizard magic, so different that no mere wizard could hope to understand it. But Thomas had done what any sensible research wizard would do and looked for clues in the middle of old theories about ancient Grecian magic, since centaurs had come from Greece in the first place.

And sure enough, he'd found ideas about centaur magic there. This was just confirmation of more. White sparks and illusions and magic that fed on fear, probably, since everyone was running around and screaming their heads off. Thomas leaned on the wall and tried to think about the way to word his conclusions to convince Petrovitch, while Bone led his people around in one more grand sweep.

"It was the centaur office, wasn't it?" he asked, just to make sure.

Bone nodded again. Thomas smiled. That settled it, as far as he was concerned. The centaurs could appear in places named after them and dedicated to them, at least once they were free of their webs. The Ministry had practically been asking for an invasion by having a

room named the centaur office. It was similar to the way that holy sites had worked in ancient Greece, with the gods appearing at certain places and stirring certain legends. Once a name and a dedication were in place, they could appear. Not that the GUTOEKOM wizards had come to any sort of consensus on just what the Greek gods had been, yet, or how they fit into the magical systems, but that didn't matter. What mattered was working out how they did it. Place magic, Thomas knew, that was the key, but of what kind?

He was engaged in these important speculations when the door on the staircase behind him opened, and Aurors tried to invade the Department, firing curses at the centaurs. Thomas was annoyed. He turned and hit the Aurors with a Mandarin spell that would give them six legs instead of two, so that they could see what it felt like to be interrupted while they were trying to do something important.

Lucius watched his wife struggling to breathe, and swallowed vicious satisfaction like a shot of Firewhiskey. Narcissa should have known better than to challenge him. Really, she had known better. She had to have done so. But what mattered was that he had her under control now. With the last of her breath, she was gasping, "Lucius, I yield." Her fingers could barely stay curled around her wand any more.

Breathing heavily, Lucius released the Choking Curse. He left the blinding one in place, however, because he was not stupid. He walked over and stood staring down at Narcissa. She barely looked as though she'd been fighting, if one excused the few wrinkles in her gown. Lucius, meanwhile, was well-aware of the mussed hair that stood away from his head, and how his breath rushed in and out of his lungs with an audible rasping noise, and how blood trickled over the side of his neck.

Not to mention the voices muttering about his emotions. A fourth voice had joined the others, a high-pitched whine that said how unfair things were, for both Draco and Narcissa to betray him. Lucius did his best to ignore it. He couldn't end the spell; it was one of those pesky ones, like the Fisher King Curse, that only the caster could undo.

He bent over Narcissa and examined her. No, he had been wrong about only the wrinkles in her gown appearing, he saw; there were

the bruises of the Choking Curse on her throat. He reached down and laid his own fingers over them, gently pinching the bruised skin and making Narcissa moan.

A fifth voice appeared to talk about his arousal. Lucius bared his teeth in its general direction. He had at least dismissed all the house elves from this wing of the Manor, even if he had originally not wanted them to witness Narcissa's tears.

The first thing he knew of Narcissa's continuing defiance was when her wand hit the side of his leg, and she whispered, "Debilitas." Harry caught Draco's hand and pulled him close to him, unable to speak, for just a moment, of what it meant to him that Draco had both emerged unharmed from a difficult situation and managed to Stun the Minister and his allies so Harry would not have to fight them.

Draco grinned back at him, a smug curve of his lips, and then kissed him hard enough to hurt. Harry blinked as a cut appeared in his own lower lip, and Draco whispered to him, "When we get back to Woodhouse, I am so fucking you."

Harry shook his head, soothed down the heat that wanted to appear in his belly at the thought, and turned to face the guards in the wand-room again. They had frozen at the sight of the Minister falling, but one look was enough to make them scramble. They had freed perhaps thirty wands from their cases already, Harry saw, and he wondered if they kept the wands organized by recency of confinement to the prison. Or perhaps all the werewolves' had been in one place.

He faced the door into Tullianum. It glimmered with wards, of course, such strong ones that most people wouldn't even notice it was there. Harry had acquired enough power that it was visible to him. And the magic was running through him, anxious to be used. He could destroy the wards with a spectacular blow and protect the people in the tunnel with him at the same time, the magic suggested.

Harry shook his head. He wouldn't do that, on the off chance it would hurt someone. He opened up his absorbere gift and ate the wards

instead. They dimmed steadily, and soon the door into Tullianum was just an ordinary door, with a locking spell on it. He heard some of his allies murmur as it appeared.

He glanced over his shoulder, and grinned. Honoria was busy creating illusions, all of big, grim wizards with dark robes and white masks and aimed wands, facing down the corridor behind them. When the Aurors arrived—Harry was a bit surprised they hadn't already, but supposed the distractions were keeping them, well, distracted—then they wouldn't know who was real and who wasn't for a good many moments. Besides, the sight of pseudo-Death Eaters would panic them.

"Trumpetflower," he called. He blinked. His magic had crept into his voice, it seemed, seeking expression any way it could, and he sounded like the karkadann. "I need you here."

The witch was at his side in moments, her nostrils flared. Harry needed her to sniff out the cells that contained werewolves from the ones that didn't. He had briefly considered a plan to free all the criminals in Tullianum, to preoccupy the Aurors with trying to recapture them, but rejected it. It would be on his head if a freed murderer did manage to escape, or someone else who had done something they deserved to be locked away for. It was for those who had committed no crime but suffering that he had come.

"Ready?" he asked, and Trumpetflower nodded. Harry reached out and snapped his fingers.

The door to Tullianum wrenched open, showing the tunnel beyond. The guards standing there cast a massed arsenal of spells the moment it happened.

Harry opened his mouth and drank them in.

Narcissa felt her wand jab home. Really, the moment Lucius had given in to temptation and laid his fingers along her throat, he had been lost. She had known where he was, and he hadn't paid attention to her hand tightening around her wand once more. Then she had been able to jab her wand forward, and the curse she chose really

didn't distinguish between which parts of the body it went into. It would weaken him no matter what happened.

Lucius fell, folding over himself with a graceless thump as all strength fled his limbs. Narcissa rolled away from him, and coughed. The grip of fingers on her throat still hurt, and she grimaced to think about what the bruises would look like. But a glamour would cover them, and she had won.

She touched her wand to her eyes and murmured, "Finite Incantatem." In a moment, the blinding curse cleared, and she could see. She shook her head and stepped across the room to her mirror, fixing her hair back into place with several small whispered spells. The face that looked back at her was pale, but still composed enough. She touched her wand to her throat, and the marks of fingers disappeared.

She turned around and came back to face Lucius again. His eyes widened, and his panting was nearly spasmodic as she bent over him. But Narcissa, wiser than he, watched his wand hand, and she saw the fingers twitch and then fall limp, too tired to get a grip of any kind.

"Too bad, Lucius," she said softly. "You should have remembered that, even though you are a stronger duelist than I am, I have won all the duels into which I poured my full heart. All our duels over Draco. Not to mention the one we fought because you wanted me to take the Mark, and, because I won that, you never brought it up again." She pressed her lips to his temple, feeling a surge of pity for him, her proud, handsome husband brought so low. The voices around him were all muttering in various tones of humiliation now.

Pity or no pity, she still kicked his wrist, hard, as he tried to snatch the hem of her gown. Lucius fell back with a moan.

"Think to yourself," Narcissa told him. "Ask yourself why I would have poured my full heart into this, why I wanted to win so badly." She kissed him, bit his lip, and turned, picking up her trunk on the way.

Just before she Apparated to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, she summoned the house elves back to this wing of the Manor. It would not do for Lucius to lie helpless on the floor for the hours it would take the Debilitas curse to wear off.

Hawthorn put her hands over her face and tried to breathe. All her limbs hurt, and her clothes were shredded. She had torn them herself, in the frenzy of her change. Her jailers had made her put them back on, insisting that they had nothing else for her to wear.

She had stayed here, in this narrow cell scarcely wider than she was and without a bed, for two nights without Wolfsbane. She had held out a feeble hope that, because the moonlight could not reach her through the thick stone, she would not transform, but of course she had. Her mind had vanished for the first time in two years, and she had become a ravening beast who would have slain her husband and daughter, had they appeared living in front of her. Denied that, she had clawed at the stone and bitten at herself. She had urinated in the corners of the cell, and the smell of piss was, to her, the smell of degradation.

Known as a werewolf, she had no life left to look forward to. Delilah Gloryflower had survived her revelation because she had a powerful family surrounding her, one that could raise constant legal challenges in the face of the demands that she be turned over to Tullianum. Hawthorn was alone, and the Aurors who descended on the Garden had known what she was, both lycanthrope and former Death Eater. They might have hated her enough for one or the other; with both, their contempt was horrible. They'd only had to scratch her with silver, and Hawthorn found herself becoming weak and sick. The scratch, high on her left shoulder, still hurt like fire, and radiated angry red lines.

She wondered, in a half-daze, if she would lose her left arm. She did not think she could bear it as calmly as Harry had borne it.

The door to her cell opened.

Hawthorn crouched back into a corner, fighting the instinct to yelp and snarl. If she could not face her torturers, or those come to lead

her to trial, like a pureblood witch—the torn robes and the wound and the smell made that impossible—then at least she would not face them like a beast.

She blinked. It was a dream. It had to be. Harry stood in the door of the cell, with a smile that faded rapidly as he watched her. Hawthorn knew the smile did not fade because she had displeased him. It faded because, impossibly, in a dream, he was here to rescue her, and he did not like the way she had been treated.

Harry turned his head and spoke words that Hawthorn did not understand, because the daze of wonder was making her heart beat so hard she couldn't hear them. Glamour appeared over her then, cloaking the rents in her robes, making them look whole again. Another glamour spread around the cell, masking the stains and the sharp smell of piss. Hawthorn began to believe that this was real, and that she might come forth from her confinement with some dignity after all.

Harry reached out and grasped her right arm, drawing her to her feet. Hawthorn couldn't restrain a gasp of pain as her left arm was jolted, and Harry's eyes went at once to the wound. They narrowed. Hawthorn held still and let him study it as long as he pleased. The pain was nothing next to the fact that she now knew no one could just gape at her bare skin.

Then Harry said quietly, "Let's go. We still have to get everyone out of here." The eyes he raised to her face blazed with anger, and for the first time, Hawthorn realized the magic around him, thick with a smell like evergreens at the break of day. "And they can never hurt you like this again," he said.

Spoken that way, it didn't sound like a promise, but a certainty, a prophecy. Hawthorn allowed herself to believe, and leaned on Harry's shoulder as he led her out of the cell.

Falco bowed his head. It had come, then.

He'd felt the burst of magic from the Ministry as he worked on spinning yet another dream for Harry, one he would be forced to pay

conscious attention to; so far, most of the others were shattering like thrown eggs against his Occlumency, and he never seemed to acknowledge the odd image that remained in his head. The dream split apart entirely as Falco heard the bell ringing from the Ministry.

Clang, clang, clang, it reverberated across the country, and woke things better left sleeping. Falco frowned as he felt Harry's power enter hidden caves and make the creatures bound there stir, as it made the bones of the dead dragon and the bones of the sleeping live one on the Isle of Man shake, as it traveled out into the ocean and roused answering screeches from the Augureys in Ireland.

Harry was raising his magic in the Ministry itself, and this time, Falco knew it was not to combat another Lord-level wizard. Tom was still in hiding, and no other Lord or Lady had yet entered the country, though they were watching, all of them, to see if the reckless youngster in Britain would yet doom them all. Falco knew what reputation his island must be gaining in the eyes of the international wizarding community, as a household of hooligans, and was ashamed.

Tom, Harry's proper opponent, was yet too weak to take him on. Falco had not managed to find any way of healing his wound.

That meant it was up to him.

He changed into his sea eagle form and sped out of the paths of Dark and Light, aiming for the real world. When he reached it, he would Apparate. It seemed that it was time he and Harry met in battle, face to face.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Against the Lord of Sea Eagles

Harry could feel his anger rising. The moment he saw Hawthorn crouched in the corner of her cell like some whipped dog, it had begun, and now it traced a glowing, warm path up from his belly to his throat, waiting to explode. The magic that danced around him and within him only urged it higher, because once his temper exploded, the magic knew he would use it more.

He concentrated on the warmth of Hawthorn's arm around his shoulders, on the way she leaned on him, and reminded himself again and again that he couldn't explode, that he needed to get her and the others out of here and insure they survived. He murmured reassurances, and took down the wards on the doors that Trumpetflower identified as having werewolves behind them, and tamed his anger again and again, shoving it back into determination. I'll let them survive. I'll get them out. I have to remember that our purpose here is to keep them all alive and insure they reach Woodhouse, not taking revenge.

He was sorry now that he hadn't managed to think of a tactic for handling the Unspeakables' time globes other than swallowing the magic. No one needed this much power, and it was already shoving at him with ideas of its own, since he held it so tightly in confinement. Harry didn't know what its personality would be like if he allowed it to finish growing, but he knew already it was mischievous.

Have to keep going, he thought, and reminded himself that anger hadn't saved Kieran, and anger at the Minister hadn't been the best way to handle that situation. Draco had been smug and chuckling when he possessed Scrimgeour. With that example of rage-handling in front of him, how could Harry justify losing his temper?

"Harry?"

Harry turned his head. Trumpetflower was standing in front of a door, her neck bent to one side and a puzzled expression on her face. "What is it?" he asked, wondering if she had smelled a werewolf imprisoned here whom they hadn't been told about.

“I—” Trumpetflower gave him a sharp look. “She isn’t a lycanthrope, but there is someone in here who smells like you, Wild.”

Harry knew at once who it must be, and he refused to allow himself to react. Lily wasn’t part of his life any longer. Neither was James. Both were in Tullianum, behind locked doors, but there were plenty of locked doors they passed without releasing the prisoners. These would just be two more. He shrugged. “I know who it is, and she stays here,” he said.

Trumpetflower’s eyes widened. “Very well,” she said, and stepped away from the door as if it were warded with blades.

Damn it. I frightened her. Harry turned to count the werewolves behind them, automatically adjusting his posture so that he could support Hawthorn. There were thirty-three, and a thirty-fourth was freed as he watched and had her wand pushed into her hand. Harry nodded. We’re close to getting out of here. And I have to remember that our primary purpose is to keep them alive. Remember that.

“Wild?”

Harry turned. Rose was near the front of the line, her nostrils flaring as she stood near a door that wasn’t as heavily warded as the others. She glanced at him and let her tongue loll out of her mouth in a grin. “Do we have room for one more werewolf to accompany us to the valley?” she asked.

Harry blinked. “Of course. Who is it?” He reached out and drained the magic from the wards, and Rose easily smashed the lock and opened the door.

The boy inside looked no older than Harry himself, though both taller and stronger. He was already sniffing, and his eyes were a brilliant enough amber that Harry knew he must have been bitten young. He stepped forward and touched his cheek to Rose’s before he glanced at Harry.

“My name is Evergreen,” he said. “I was part of Loki’s pack. You must be our new alpha. You have the transferred smell about you.”

Harry fought to keep from grimacing at the mention of Loki, and thought he was successful. "Yes," he said. "And I do remember you. You were the one who bit Elder Gillyflower and—" And started this mess, he wanted to say, but now was not the time or the place to sound accusing. "And went to Tullianum for it," he finished. "Even though you were born a Muggle."

Evergreen grinned. "That's me." He touched Rose's shoulder and moved around her into the corridor. "It's good to see you again, Rose." He glanced up and down the hallway. "This is a general jailbreak?"

"No," said Harry, as Trumpetflower yelped near another door and he reached out to remove the wards on that one. "Only for people unfairly accused of no other crime than being werewolves and tossed in here."

Evergreen's grin widened. "It's good to see that you're doing what Loki wanted you to do," he said. "Even if it is later than he wanted, and took more provocation than he thought it would."

Harry didn't respond to that. He watched as the newly released werewolf reclaimed his wand, and listened.

There was some strange sound under the reverberations of power all through the tunnel. Harry could feel it drawing nearer like a storm; it definitely came from outside the Ministry. If he concentrated, he thought it sounded like jangling bells. A delicate sound, not threatening, but he shouldn't have been able to hear it through this magic.

A Lord-level wizard was coming. And while the power was barely familiar, since they had met only once, Harry knew it must be Falco. He would have known Voldemort anywhere, he thought.

Harry suppressed the urge to scream. He probably wants to scold me for rebelling against the Ministry, or for not keeping his balance. And he will certainly fight me. He wouldn't approach like this, forsaking all caution, if he just wanted to watch.

He pushed the urge to scream into more determination, and flung out his hand. If the magic wanted to be used, then he had a use for it. He thought of the need to keep the werewolves alive, to spare as many people casualties in getting out of the Ministry as possible, and to reach Woodhouse safely, and pushed.

The magic poured out of him as if he were a hive and it were the honey, thick and viscous, but assuming the shape he wanted it to make. A shining corridor formed, bursting through the walls of Tullianum and running up through the Ministry, finding the lift chute and running up from there until it met the Atrium, then rising again until it hit the surface of the alley. Harry concentrated, building the walls up, making them as strong as wards backed by linked Shield Charms, so that neither Unspeakables attacking from the sides with flung artifacts nor Falco striking from above would get through.

He wanted them out of here alive, and he wanted them out of here safe. When they reached the end of the corridor, then people would have to Apparate; Harry couldn't extend the corridor from London to Woodhouse without breaking about fifty thousand laws centered around the International Statute of Secrecy. But they had always known that. It was fighting their way out of the Ministry, with the added complication of an angry Lord-level wizard arriving, that was the problem.

He pressed his hand against his throat, and cast *Sonus*, so that when he spoke everyone could hear him. "You'll have to take the corridor," he said. "Follow it until it ends. As long as you stay in the path, then nothing can hurt you. When you reach the end, you'll be Apparating to a place called Woodhouse. If you don't know where it is, Side-Along Apparate with someone who came with me. They know. You should be safe there."

"What about not wanting to go?" demanded one of the werewolves who must have been a member of the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts. Harry didn't recognize her, at least. "If we escape with you, like this, then the Ministry is going to see us as rebels."

“Your only alternative is to stay here,” said Harry. “And you should have seen how the Ministry treats werewolves in Tullianum by now.”

The woman hesitated, as if for half a heartbeat she were thinking about Stunning him to gain credit with the Ministry, but then she glanced around at the people who had come with him and subsided. Most of her comrades were already hurrying up the glittering path that stretched ahead of them. Harry was glad to see Adalrico Bulstrode near the front of the line, visible by his limp, urging people along with both dignity and grace. Millicent wasn't far from his side. As long as those two were there, Harry thought, he could count on the line to keep in order.

He turned his head upward. Falco was very nearly level with the Ministry by now. Harry thought, and a whip of light coiled around his body and rose up through the stone, to gain form and substance when it entered the air. It ought to be as good a signal as any other to Falco of Here I am.

“Why aren't you coming?” Draco asked him.

Harry started. It seemed that people had obeyed orders for once in their lives, because when he glanced around, he was standing near the back of the line. Only Draco, Owen, Michael, and Syrinx stayed clustered close to him, staring at him anxiously; most people were at least twenty feet away down the corridor.

“Because Falco Parkinson is approaching,” he said, and saw Draco's eyes widen. “Yes. Exactly. I need everyone else out of here. Now. With luck, he won't want our duel to destroy the Ministry, but if anyone associated with me remains here, he could attack them. Move.”

To his credit, Draco started moving, but he reached back and caught Harry's left wrist as he did so, and Harry's three sworn companions stayed at his back. Harry growled under his breath—his being in the corridor would probably encourage Falco to attack it—but the thought of the arguments that would pop up later if he tried to badger Draco into leaving him alone kept him moving. His eyes remained on the ceiling, anxiously scanning. Falco's magic sill spoke from the air, not

as if he were diving under the ground and trying to strike from beneath.

Then the side of the corridor split open, and Falco arrived from thin air, a wizard with long, flying silver hair, clad in dark green robes that shone with some symbol Harry thought might be a scale, his hand held out. Where that hand moved, reality rippled, and Harry saw the corridor drying up and flaking away.

He had no idea what might happen if that hand touched him, and no time to find out. He rolled, pushing Draco into Michael, Owen, and Syrinx, forcing them backwards and away from the immediate scope of the duel. Then he raised a shield that, he hoped, would keep them safe.

Falco had nearly reached him by the time the shield was done. He launched the reality-bubble at Harry's head.

Harry ate it. It cost him to do so. He could feel the same dragging pain in his gut and throat and magic that he had experienced when he was gathering in Voldemort's tainted power during the Midsummer battle. Sooner or later, the absorbere gift closed in on itself and tried to digest what it had swallowed. Harry was reaching the point of oversaturation. Not even creating the corridor so that his people could escape unmolested had used as much magic as he hoped.

"I wish it did not have to come to this," Falco said sadly, as he landed in front of Harry. He still looked more than half sea eagle, his hair gleaming like feathers, his feet having the shape edge of talons, as though he had not bothered to complete his Animagus transformation. "If you had Declared for Light, then I would have helped you as well as Tom. Britain needs a Dark and a Light Lord, to keep the balance between them both."

Harry didn't bother answering. He had no idea what Falco could do; the best he could do was gather in his own magic and release it in a form that he hoped Falco wouldn't fight that well, because he knew that Falco didn't share the same gifts that he and Voldemort did.

A dark green snake solidified in front of him, one that had Sylarana's eyes, and fangs, and Locusta venom. Harry hissed out a command in Parseltongue, and it slid forward, gaze fixed on Falco.

Falco waved a lazy hand. His power spluttered out and destroyed the snake. Harry rebuilt it, the scales piling on even faster this time around. The magic, happy to be of use and recognizing a familiar pattern, spun and dived and darted and wove the serpent back into being in moments.

Falco dodged the snake's first strike, but his gaze remained on Harry. Harry met it fearlessly. He was fairly sure Falco was a Legilimens, but he didn't think Falco had the power to compel him, any more than Voldemort or Dumbledore had. Perhaps it would do the irascible old man good, to realize that Harry had no intention of backing out of this rebellion.

In a moment, Harry realized something was wrong, something else that Falco knew and he had never studied. He couldn't remove his eyes from Falco's. His mind was tingling and going numb, and his will to command his magic was going to sleep. It wasn't compulsion, because Harry was sure he would have struggled instinctively against that by now. It just gave him—different thoughts.

Harry found his breath slowing, his head lolling back on his neck, the sharp, urgent ideas about getting the werewolves out alive deserting him. Falco carefully stripped back those emotions and dived deeper into his mind.

And he found the anger Harry had been suppressing.

Harry found himself awake again, alive, the rage bursting out of him like a golden fist out of his chest. It hit and crushed the snake, which was trying to bite Falco once more, but it also hit and dealt Falco a stunning blow. Harry saw him lose his feet and fly backwards, an expression of true surprise on his face before he slammed into the stone of a Tullianum corridor and lost all expression for a moment.

Harry snarled. His ears rang with the karkadann's cry, and he felt as if her breath were here, raking over him. He wanted to rend, to tear, to

kill. He thought of the way he had killed Dumbledore, and wanted to do the same to Falco. He could strip him of all his magic, draining it into another vessel so that he wouldn't lose the ability to swallow, and then take even the magic that had kept him alive so long. Wouldn't the Dark and the Light be pleased that someone who had fooled them was dying? They must see that Falco wasn't going to grant his allegiance to either one of them any time soon.

And then he heard a voice cry out his name behind him, sharp and urgent, and Draco blazed like a phoenix in his mind.

What was he doing? He didn't have the time to drain Falco, assuming it was even possible; Falco didn't have Dumbledore's fear of the prophecy paralyzing him. His first goal was to get everyone out alive.

Harry tamed his rage, though now it felt like pulling on the reins of a cart to which the karkadann was attached. He turned it, and sent it plunging in another direction. He took a deep breath, and concentrated on a vision of the corridor intact, whole, with the shimmering colors that made up its walls spreading like oil slicks. Impenetrable oil slicks. He just didn't have time for this. None of his people had time for this.

He turned and checked on Draco, Owen, Michael, and Syrinx. The shield that had sheltered them was half-crumbled. Harry nodded sharply to them. "We're going to run," he said. "Up the corridor. Go in front of me. Don't look back. I need you at the end to help Apparate werewolves to Woodhouse. I don't think they can have moved all of them out yet."

Draco opened his mouth. It looked like it was forming a protest. For that matter, Owen looked as if he were going to join in the act.

Syrinx caught Harry's eye, bowed, and said, "Of course. They need us." Then she began to run. Owen hesitated, and then, as if he remembered that he bore the lightning bolt scar, too, and didn't want a Light witch to outdo him, he followed. Draco lingered, still staring hard at Harry. Michael was probably not going until Draco did, Harry knew.

Harry saw Falco stirring from the corner of his eye. They didn't have much time. "Please," he said. "Draco. Run."

Falco vanished.

Harry felt his magic as a pendulum swinging out, gathering momentum and weight on the way. When it hit, it would be massive. Harry poured all his magic into the strength of the corridor, all he had gathered and then some. He would have cut a hole in his own magical core and drained out his power like Voldemort's if he thought it would help.

"Not without you," said Draco.

When Falco's strike landed, it would either splinter the corridor, or it would bounce from Harry's shields. Harry didn't know what it would do to anyone who stood with him, unprotected.

"Go!" Harry screamed, and that seemed to convince Michael, if not Draco. He grabbed Draco's arm and practically yanked him off his feet as he started to run, feet drumming on blue light. Harry turned to face the cut of the pendulum. It came back at him as if it had a scythe on the end, like a pendulum he had seen once in the Room of Requirement, when he used it to heal from what his parents had done to him.

Harry had been willing to let that pendulum cut his palm and shed blood, so that he could renounce his family name. He would endure far more than that, to keep the corridor intact and the boy he loved, with everyone else, safe.

Falco's magic met his.

Harry felt the walls of Tullianum shake, and wards brace and buckle. He heard terrified screaming from those prisoners still in their cells, and probably from the upper floors, where the Ministry's people would be wondering what the hell had just happened. He heard a howl that might have come from the throat of a wounded werewolf, far ahead of him.

He felt it throughout his body.

The magic seemed to liquefy his bones and turn his viscera to jelly. Lightning bolts crept up his arms. Harry could hear a stronger pounding than his heart in his ears, and wondered madly if it was possible to hear one's brain sloshing against one's skull. He heard a single dull snap under the pounding, too, and grunted. Broken bone, don't know which one.

A gnawing, familiar pain low in his side told him. Broken rib. He had first felt one when Quirrell, acting for Voldemort, cast a Crucio on him in their first year. He breathed through the pain, as he had done then. He was fighting for higher stakes now than he had done even then—more lives, and as much peace as possible.

He lifted his head when he thought it was done.

The corridor had held.

Harry saw Falco hovering beyond it, staring at him, his face oddly rippled by the glass-like light. He had wings, and a sea eagle's face, but a human body, still flaring with the dark green robes.

Harry stared back at him, and wondered if he would try another strike. He knew he would resist it. It might break another rib, or his leg, but he would survive it.

Falco only shook his head, and then vanished. Harry concentrated. He could feel his magic, hear the jangling bell-music, but it was retreating. Falco had given up on harassing them, for now.

Harry let out a long breath, let the pain throb, and forced himself to his feet. He looked up the corridor ahead of him, and saw only tiny, distant figures, hurrying away. He permitted himself a grim smile, and then began to time his walking, around more and more throbs of pain from his wounded side.

His magic pulled feebly at the pain, but Harry had given all the swallowed power to the corridor, and he had never studied the kind of healing spells that would let him set broken bones; the ones to heal

wounds inflicted by curses had seemed more valuable. He was afraid of setting the bone wrong if he tried to heal it on his own.

At least he could travel by Apparition, he thought. Traveling by Floo or Portkey with a broken rib hurt to contemplate.

Step and hurt, step and hurt. Yes, it ached, but Harry had had worse. His hand, which rested on the rib to cradle it, twitched, and Harry smiled grimly. He couldn't reach the stump of his left wrist from here.

And he could turn the pain into the same determination that had carried him forward so far, and made him resist the urge to turn tail and flee when Falco struck. Getting everyone out alive was what was important. He was climbing up the staircase the corridor had formed through the lift shafts right now, and hadn't seen a single dead body. That cheered him up immensely. Falco was more frightened than he liked to admit.

He had believed that by bending time and curving away from the boy, he could keep his attack hidden. He should have been able to. It was one tactic which, dependent as it was on sheer strength, he had never been able to teach Albus; his innate preference for subtlety had sat in the way. And the boy was less powerful than Albus, especially with so much of his magic drained into protecting others. He should have crumbled before the blow.

Instead, the boy had sensed him coming and had time to prepare.

Falco's mind was not on what Harry might do to unseat the balance in the future, now, or what the international wizarding community would think of Britain. His mind was on a room in a house at Godric's Hollow that he had had to spend days analyzing before he came up with an answer.

Harry should not have been able to sense my attack.

But Tom could have.

Falco was wondering, again, what exactly had happened in that house. He had thought he understood. A series of coincidences that, timed and dancing to prophecy, were not coincidences. An equality of power that had allowed Harry to survive the Killing Curse; a touch too weak and the curse would have slain him, a touch too strong and the returning magic would have blown his body apart. A transfer of Darkness that was not yet complete, and had made Harry Voldemort's magical heir.

But that transfer had included only Parseltongue and the absorbere gift, Falco had thought. What he discovered in the room had certainly led him to think so.

He now had to consider that perhaps the transfer had sped more than just those two abilities along the path to Harry. And if so, what else had come down the link? What else could Harry do that his magical father could also do? What if he were wrong, and Harry should have Declared Dark, not Light, after all?

But what if he must Declare Light, to balance out the Darkness within his soul?

This had splintered his plans. Falco soared back into contemplation, sadder and wiser than he had been a few minutes ago. Harry continued to confound his expectations, but it was much better that this happen and come out into the open. If Falco had not known this and then prepared to destroy Harry, he could have perished because of his overconfidence.

Better to wait and study and see what comes.

Draco finally managed to resist the pull of Michael's arm when they were somewhere on the stairs to the ninth level. Jerking away, he drew his wand, pointed it at the wide-eyed boy, and said, "If you ever do that to me again, I'll make sure that people think you're a girl for the rest of your life."

"But you—" said Michael, and then clenched his jaw shut and turned away. Draco let out a shaky breath and faced back the way they had

come, scanning the red-green-blue tunnel frantically for a sign of Harry.

He saw him, stumbling on the steps but always making his way higher. His right arm curled around his side, supporting what looked like a broken bone, and when he came closer, Draco could see the dark stain of blood on his robes. He bit back the impulse to hurt someone and reached out, touching the crook of Harry's elbow. Harry looked up and blinked, then frowned.

"Draco? You should have made your way to the end of the tunnel," he said. "It'll take longer to Apparate everyone out if we don't have people who know Woodhouse there."

"What were you thinking, telling me to hurry away like that?" Draco breathed. He had intended the words to come out in a shout. He found that he couldn't make them. Harry's face was pale, and he looked as though someone had hit him multiple times with a Bludger, never mind the broken bone.

"Trying to keep you safe," said Harry. "You couldn't have withstood that blow from Falco. I barely withstood that blow from Falco." He nodded up the staircase, beyond Michael. "And now I'm here, so can we hurry to the end of the tunnel? I think there are some people who will refuse to leave until they see I'm safe—" his voice said he didn't know why "—and the longer we linger here, the more danger we're in."

Michael was already climbing. Harry followed him, and Draco stayed at his side where the width of the stairs allowed him to do so. He wondered why Harry wasn't groaning, and then realized the groaning was probably masked by the huffing breaths he took every time his foot came down.

"I didn't want to leave you," Draco murmured. "And I could have stood beside you, you know. No need to toss me behind a shield."

Harry looked at him gently, though for a moment his jaw clashed as he ground his teeth together. "I know that, Draco," he said. "I know that you want to fight beside me. You did wonderfully with the

Minister. But Falco was attacking with sheer strength, and he almost defeated me. I'm still not sure what sent him away. At that point, you couldn't stand against him, and if I had seen you die or get wounded, I would have gone mad. So I chose the best compromise I could."

Draco chewed his tongue for a moment as he thought about that. Didn't he still have the right to demand to stand beside Harry? Or would asking make him as childish as when he'd asked Harry to choose his side over Potter's and Patil's?

He didn't know. It bothered him that he didn't know.

They reached the end of that staircase, and then the corridor ran smooth and straight for a while through the Atrium. Draco could see Ministry employees gaping at them; a few were tapping with their wands on the side of the tunnel, but they drew back from that hastily when they saw Harry. Draco smirked at them, and put an arm around Harry's unwounded side to support him for a moment as his steps grew heavier and his breath huffier.

Figures moved near the gates, making Draco start, but it was Moody, along with several other people who kept their faces cloaked in glamours that shifted and changed, revealing too many features to keep track of. Moody grinned at Harry. "Mission done," he said. "Information obtained."

Harry nodded, and a doorway slid open in the side of the tunnel. Moody was the only one who entered. The others turned and faded back into the shadows.

"Contacts," Moody told Draco when he saw him staring. "They don't trust anyone except me." He tossed a wooden scrollcase in the air and caught it as it came down again, laughing. "We got what we came for."

Draco wanted to ask what that was, since the only role Moody's contacts had played in the original plan was to fetch the password for the room where the wands were stored and to act as a distraction, but he kept his tongue. Harry's huffing breaths were growing worse, and from the number of staring figures on the staircase ahead, where

the tunnel rose up to the alley they'd come in by, most of their group had indeed waited for Harry. Draco heard them cheering at the sight of him.

He also felt a surge of magic from Harry. When he glanced at him, his face looked normal again, and the stain of dark blood on his robes was gone. Harry also lifted his head and walked as steadily as possible, nodding back to the cheerers in a reassuring fashion.

I suppose he has to, Draco thought. Otherwise, they'll worry too much about him to fix on Apparating. When we get to Woodhouse, then he has time to collapse and drink a healing potion.

They climbed the stairs, Draco reversing his position so that he could stand close to Harry's broken rib and keep anyone too enthusiastic from jostling the wound. Luckily, only a few people actually tried to hug Harry. Others kept their distance, talking in soft and excited voices. Harry made a point of nodding and replying to most of them, though Draco could see how eagerly his gaze sought the end of the tunnel and the point where they could leap into nothingness and continue on to Woodhouse.

They reached it without anyone from the Ministry stopping or slowing them down. Draco took a werewolf by the arm at Harry's insistence, glancing at him all the while. Harry was talking to the werewolf called Evergreen, though, and didn't look back at him. A moment later, they vanished.

Really, Draco thought, and did his best to think of the wide expanse of grass inside Woodhouse, near the pine forest, where the centaurs liked to stand. He hoped that no one else would be Apparating there just then. Actually, he wasn't sure if he could Apparate, and if not, then he would wait until someone else came back for him, but he wanted to try.

Then a phoenix's warble broke his concentration. Draco sighed. "Sorry," he said to the werewolf, a staring, shocked woman of about thirty, who just nodded. Draco bent over his left wrist. "Yes?"

"Draco?"

It was his mother's voice. Draco blinked, and swallowed, and suspected that sorrow would distract him too much to Apparate after all. "Mother?" he asked. "Didn't Father tell you about the disownment?" He wasn't going to let her contact him under false pretenses, and thus hide the choice he had made. He had expected Narcissa to be horribly disappointed with him and stay with Lucius, which had to mean that she didn't yet know.

"He did, Draco," his mother's voice said softly. "I've left your father for now. He didn't want me to leave. I'm at Grimmauld Place. I'll join you as soon as you tell me where you're going."

So it wasn't tears that were going to distract me, but joy. Draco choked back a whoop. He still considered himself a Malfoy, and it would be undignified to do that in front of a complete stranger. He didn't ask his mother if she was sure, either. That would be insulting to her as someone who was born a Black and had married into the Malfoy name.

"We're at Woodhouse," he said. "You know, the place that we fought Voldemort's forces last October?" The werewolf next to him gave him a sudden look. Draco ignored her. If she didn't know what she was getting into, then she should never have left Tullianum.

"I remember it well," said Narcissa. "I will see you in a few moments, my son."

"See you," said Draco, and let the communication spell end. He knew he was grinning like a fool, and that he didn't think he could hide. It didn't matter. His mother had chosen him over his father. He wasn't going to be the only person with the name of Malfoy in Harry's rebellion after all.

He didn't even care that Michael had to Apparate him, and Owen had to Apparate the werewolf. He still couldn't stop smiling, and it only grew worse when they landed in a puddle not far from the quadrangle of stone buildings and he saw his mother waiting, her blonde hair shifting behind her in the brisk breeze.

Harry concealed his gasp as they landed, but that apparently wasn't enough to fool Evergreen. The young werewolf sniffed once, then looked at him, and for the first time since he'd come out of his cell, some of his grin faded.

"I can smell blood," he said.

Harry nodded, and cursed himself for not remembering a glamour that would cover scent. Well, since he was about to take a healing potion and deal with the broken rib, it wouldn't be a problem for much longer. "I'm going to take care of that," he said. "You can wait here for me, or ask someone else what's going on." He glanced up and saw Camellia hurrying over from her sentry post under the pines. "Some of your packmates are here."

Evergreen glanced up and gave a joyous howl, hurtling several steps forward. Camellia met him in the middle of it, and they rolled on the ground together, mock-growling and tussling with each other. Camellia laid her head on the grass just long enough to give Harry a look of eloquent thanks.

Harry smiled, then turned away and walked as rapidly as he could towards the wooden house and the room where they'd placed the healing potions his allies had brought along. Tonks met him on the way there, studying him worriedly. Harry nodded to her. "Broken rib."

"It'll be tender even if you use Bone-Set," Tonks warned him.

"I know," said Harry. "But the point is to deal with the pain. I have too much to do to let it incapacitate me."

Tonks opened her mouth as if she would say something, then shut it, shaking her head. Her hair turned black, but she just shrugged when Harry questioned her. Harry decided it couldn't be of importance. Tonks was one to speak her mind when she had something to say.

He went to work on the pain instead. It was too sharp to ignore, the way that Lily had trained him to ignore most of the curses he cast on himself, but he could take the screaming urge to curl up around it and

transform it into something else. So he did. By the time he did locate the narrow green bottle of Bone-Set that Elfrida had brought and swallow it, the pain and desperation had become more whips to urge him along the path towards what would come. They had freed the werewolves from Tullianum. Now he had to settle them into Woodhouse, and prepare for the Ministry's response.

Tonks went on watching him all the while. Harry asked her twice more what was wrong, once before he drank the Bone-Set and again while he waited for the sweep of honeyed fire through him to mend the bone and ease some of the pain, but she shrugged again the first time and said the second, "When I know how to phrase it, then I'll tell you."

Harry had to admit that was fair. He used the moments when he had to stand still and let the potion work to list tasks in his head. Contact the shops and increase the food deliveries, tighten the wards around the Black houses so that anyone trying to break in would bounce back—an impossible task when there were as many people living there as had been the case with the werewolves, since they had to be able to pass in and out, and breathe—let the people waiting for word back in Hogwarts know that he was all right, find places for everyone to sleep, check on the wounded, explain how the defenses in Woodhouse worked, arrange for regular patrols of the valley...

"Sir?"

Harry looked up. Syrinx Gloryflower was standing in the doorway, her face solemn. "There's an argument breaking out, sir," she said. "One of the werewolves attacking your good name, and another defending it. It hasn't come to teeth yet, but it might."

Harry nodded and moved a few steps away from the cupboard that had contained the potions, deliberately raising his arms. The skin was still tight and tender enough over his ribs to make him hiss, but he could move.

"There directly," he said, offered one more reassuring smile to Tonks, and then hurried after Syrinx.

Remus was fighting to control his rage, but it was hard to remember that he should do so, even with ordinary witches and wizards watching, when his opponent was as strong, with as much of a temper, as he was. Camellia had been bitten very young, just like Remus, and he didn't have to hold back if he attacked her. And right now, he was as close to attacking her as he had been since he first met her.

"He left me behind." He tried to speak softly, but to put a proper snarl behind the words, he needed to raise his voice. "He's my alpha, and he left me here. I'm a wizard, and I could have helped, but he left me here."

Camellia stood in front of him, lips wrinkled, amber eyes flashing, and seemed as oblivious to their audience as Remus was conscious of it. "Because he can't trust you," she said. "We all know why. You're still too much a wizard, Remus. You haven't let the packmind wash over you. You haven't adapted to considering him a leader in place of Loki; you still think of him as a temporary replacement. Or you think you should be leader." Camellia's jaws snapped shut, and she flicked her head to the side as if she were tearing out someone's throat. "And we all know why that began, and where that would end. We don't need someone as changeable as you are leading us."

Remus growled. He didn't move his eyes from Camellia's, keeping them locked straight in a challenging stare, and Camellia began to growl back. They moved closer to each other, or at least Remus did. He could feel his blood singing in his body, his shoulders tensing and hunching. Camellia would, too, the spiral of inevitability catching them up and turning them closer and closer to each other. One of them must spring first, but Remus didn't know which one it would be. He had little control right now; if the tension built up in him first, he would do it, but nothing said it had to be him.

"Enough."

Camellia's eyes snapped away from Remus's as if torn, and she dropped into a crouch, arching her neck to bare her throat. Remus felt the impulse to do the same thing, but he shook his head. This

wasn't the alpha Wild speaking. This was the boy he had known from a child, his friend's son, Harry.

The person who had left him behind, when he could have come along, defended the captives, and been one more person to soothe them with his scent and Apparate them back to safety. He turned sharply on Harry.

He surprised himself by locking his eyes in the wrong place, on Harry's shoulder; somehow, he had forgotten this latest growth spurt. He shook his head and met Harry gaze to gaze. That wasn't much better, actually, and not only because of the pack instincts urging him to look away. He felt a creeping irritation at the deep calmness there. How could Harry be so calm? Granted, he had managed to survive and get everyone away from Tullianum without casualties, but he had to have heard the argument. The Harry Remus had known would have shown more empathy for his side.

"Why did you leave me?" Remus snarled at him.

"Simple," said Harry, as if they were discussing the weather. "I didn't trust you."

Remus braced himself to keep from trembling. Both the wizard and the werewolf in him hated that statement. "Why?" he whispered. And he had meant that statement to be proud, and it didn't come out that way.

Harry tilted his head. "Because of this," he said. "You alter like water with wind on it, Remus. You could have helped me, but perhaps you would have cast a curse at the Tullianum guards for treating werewolves the way they did. Perhaps you would have argued with me at a crucial moment. Perhaps you would have disobeyed an order I gave and got hurt as a result."

"I am firm in my devotion to the pack," said Remus.

"Which is why you're arguing with me." Harry took a step forward, staring at him deliberately.

Remus couldn't help it; he had to avert his gaze. "This is an unusual situation," he said. "Having a human alpha is—not done."

He could see Harry shrug from the corner of his eye. "Loki chose me. I wouldn't have asked for the responsibility if he didn't think me fit for it." Harry smiled. "Be happy, Remus. I'm fighting for the rights of werewolves the way you wanted me to, at last. And I'll welcome reconciliation any time you choose to reach out and start acting like a man—or wolf—who wants to discuss his problems, instead of an innocent wronged. For right now, that doesn't seem likely."

He turned and walked away. Remus stood where he was, shivering and wondering what in the world he should do next. The rebuke had hurt, like a cuff with tooth behind it.

He had been hurt when Harry left him behind, and the reason still seemed too simple. Why can't he trust me? Was changing my mind and joining the pack the only thing that convinced him I might be untrustworthy?

One thing was clear to Remus now, though. He would find little sympathy from his packmates for the problems of living with a human alpha, or having a boy he had helped to raise in a position of authority over him. Most of them had adapted to Harry's presence without a pause.

Perhaps the problem really wasn't with Harry or the pack, but with him.

"But he didn't have to say it in front of everyone," Michael said, for the fortieth time.

Owen restrained the very adult and mature urge to slap his twin upside the head. Then he wondered why he was restraining himself. His hand shot out, and caught Michael's temple a solid hit as he whipped around from pacing their room. Michael, utterly unprepared, staggered and sat down on his bed, then put a hand to the bruise, which was turning dark purple, and frowned at Owen.

“What was that for?” he asked. His fingers twitched, wanting his wand, Owen knew. He probably only kept himself from reaching for it under the sure and certain knowledge that Owen could out-duel him.

“I told you this was going to happen, that’s what it was for,” said Owen, sitting down on his own bed and leaning forward. “The moment you started pining for his boyfriend, I told you.”

“Draco flirted with me,” said Michael. “Or, at least, he was happy to take in my admiration and pretend it mattered to him.” He paused, blinking. “Do you think he did that just to get me to admire him more?” he whispered.

Owen rolled his eyes. “And now the secret of why you’re attracted to him comes out,” he said. “You’re both brats, and you’re both blind as fuck.”

Michael turned a sulky shoulder towards him.

“I don’t care who you’re attracted to,” Owen told him plainly. “Even a little flirting isn’t a problem; I know you never tried to put your hand in his pants.” Michael stiffened at that, and Owen paused and stared at him. “Please tell me you’re not that much of an idiot.”

“Of course I’m—“ Michael broke off, fuming at the lack of a good way to answer that statement. “I object to you referring to it in such a crude manner,” he said at last.

“So, staring and flirting aren’t problems,” said Owen, deciding he wouldn’t even touch this latest bit of ridiculousness. “But did you think that Malfoy would really fall in love with you, Michael? To get upset when he talks about fucking Harry is stupid.”

“He just didn’t have to do it in public,” whined Michael.

Owen stood, shaking his head. He was glad that he wasn’t vates, and didn’t have to do the intricate little dance Harry did to spare his twin’s feelings. That meant he could say exactly what Michael needed to hear.

“Frankly, I don’t understand why they’re in love with each other,” he said. “It must be shared experiences. Harry could do better. Malfoy’s so self-involved you’d think he’d rather marry his own mirror. But I don’t need to know why it works for them. I just know that it does. And if you sulk and whine about it, and that impairs the oath you swore to Harry, I will take it out of your hide.”

“As my two-minutes-older brother?” Michael objected.

“As head of the Rosier-Henlin family.”

That at least got through to him. Michael lowered his eyes. “All right,” he whispered. “I understand. It was a stupid mistake, and I would be even stupider if I let it hurt Harry. That doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt, you know.” He flopped down on the bed and pulled a pillow over his face.

Owen shook his head and strode for the door. He would contact their mother, to reassure Medusa that they were both all right, and then he would join Syrix in settling as many werewolves as they could. He, at least, remembered what it meant to be a Lord’s sworn companion, and that didn’t include hiding one’s face and sighing over love matches that were never meant to be.

“You’ll never have to go without Wolfsbane again.”

Hawthorn started and dropped her hands, which had been covering her face. She’d been shown to a narrow wooden room in the central building of the quadrangle, given a bed, and told to rest. She couldn’t rest, though. Even with a window in the wall, this reminded her too much of her cell in Tullianum.

The sense of lightness and magic, and the fresh wild scent, that came with Harry were most welcome. Hawthorn looked at him in silence, not sure what to say. She was caught between intense gratitude for her rescue, intense humiliation at the way she’d been treated, and a growing rage and hatred hot enough to melt iron.

“I promise you,” Harry said, moving forward and sitting down on a stool at the end of the bed. That put his head lower than hers.

Hawthorn didn't doubt that had been on purpose. "Never again." He clasped her hand. Hawthorn wondered if he was pouring magic into her, or if the surge of strength she experienced when he did that came from being close to the one she'd chosen to follow.

"How much of this rebellion did you start because of me?" She asked it quietly, but Harry heard.

"A good deal," said Harry. "The hunting season the Ministry announced would have pushed me into it, but when I read that you were arrested..." He shook his head. "It was the end." He looked directly into her eyes. "Do you know who betrayed you?"

The rage and hatred boiled over. Hawthorn bared her teeth. Harry didn't move. Hawthorn supposed that spending a good deal of his time in the last two months with a pack of accepted werewolves had taught him to ignore that. "No," she whispered. "They are dead when I find out."

"The number of people does seem to be limited," said Harry, and sighed. "But I don't think it can have been anyone in the Alliance, or they would know I'm set to drain them of their magic once I find them. Who would risk becoming a Squib?"

Hawthorn snarled again.

"Greyback bit you as revenge for not helping him raise Voldemort, though," Harry went on quietly. "Do you think that Walden Macnair was his only co-conspirator in that plan? Or could there have been others, people who would remember the bite, and have the ability to pass the knowledge that you were a werewolf along?"

That had been Hawthorn's first thought. She shook her head. "They never let me know all their names," she said. "I can tell you what former Death Eaters I suspect of likeliness to do something like that, but I don't think it's enough."

"We'll find them," said Harry, and his hand ground down on hers hard enough to crush bone. Hawthorn was a werewolf, though, which meant stronger than the normal run of witches. She squeezed back.

“And they are dead when we do,” she said. “And the Ministry guards who treated me as they did are dead.”

Harry’s hesitation was infinitesimal, but she caught it; she smelled the surge of uncertainty in his scent. “What?” She held the growl back with an effort. To be a son of high principles was a fine thing, but surely Harry should understand how she felt, that she would want revenge for her mistreatment.

“They will be dealt with,” said Harry quietly. “But if a murder returns you to Tullianum, is it the best course?”

Hawthorn couldn’t face his eyes right now. She put her arm over her face and rolled away. It was her left arm, and there came the faintest tingling from her Dark Mark as she felt Harry’s gaze linger on it. Yes, she thought at him. I am a vicious witch who took revenge for the killing of my daughter, and I was the Red Death, and I want revenge for this, not justice.

She suspected Harry would probably persuade her otherwise, in the end, but she wanted to enjoy these uninterrupted moments of rage.

“I wanted to kill something, when I saw you,” Harry said softly.

That was new. Hawthorn peered out from beneath her arm. “Why didn’t you?”

Harry smiled slightly. “Because we weren’t there to kill.” He deliberately let his hand glance across her Dark Mark. “Sleep well, and let me know if you need anything.”

Hawthorn stared at his back as he left, and wondered if she should be comforted or confused. Then she decided to put it aside for now, and enjoy being in a room that had a tub off to one side spelled to fill with hot water.

For the first time in three days, she would be clean.

Harry paused outside Hawthorn’s room to shake away the memories of her crouched, shaking and bewildered, in a corner, and the

moment when he had nearly destroyed half the prison with his newly acquired magic. Reliving the memories brought the emotion back.

And his rage did no good, could do no good, unless he could use it to fuel other purposes.

He shoved it down again, transformed it into energy to complete the next few tasks on his list, rubbed his forehead as his scar ached, and then strode away to look for Draco and his mother. It was wonderful that Narcissa had come to their side, had personally chosen them over Lucius—Harry would never have thought she would do so—and he wanted to make sure she knew she was welcome.

And then there would be more things to do. There truly was no ending, no resting.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. He had told Draco once that life was those unending responsibilities one had. He couldn't complain about a lack of excitement or variety, at least.

Smothering a wry smile, he veered towards the sight of white-blond hair.

Interlude: The Liberator's Fourth Letter

September 30th, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I ask that you forgive me for sending this letter at a time when the whole of the British wizarding world is abroil with the rebellion of Harry vates. I know you are busy. However, my parents are distracted along with all those other false fools who pretend to have Declared for Light when they have really only Declared for peace and safety. This means they have let more information than usual slip to me, and I have been able to send this owl off much sooner than I might have been able to otherwise.

The more my parents talk about Falco Parkinson, the more concerned I am. He does not seem to have the constraints that Albus Dumbledore had. As mad as he was at the end, the Light Lord had at least lived in our world and knew much about the political and emotional currents running through it. Falco Parkinson has not lived in our world. He retreated. I have researched such retreats before this, when I first became curious about Lords and Ladies of great power. Going into the "paths," as the books call them, is always bad. It detaches a wizard from what it means to be human. He thinks in terms of ideals. He regards other people as pieces on a chessboard.

This was not seen as such a bad thing in older centuries, because many wizards thought of magical creatures, or Muggles, in the same way. But when these Lords and Ladies began to treat other wizards as chess pieces, then wars started, because our proud people do not like to be so disregarded. Lords and Ladies were gradually urged to stay part of the world and not retreat into the paths, and many did.

Falco Parkinson is never recorded as Declaring for either Dark or Light. Why my parents are clinging so fervently to him, I do not know. I think only his connection with Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix reassures them.

We are dealing with an opponent who considers none of us real in any important sense, Minister. We are dealing with an opponent who

considers us small beads to slide along a scale, so that he might bring it into balance.

And who will determine that balance? Why, he will, of course.

We must have freedom—both from Falco Parkinson, and from the people who would ride on his talons as the only route to regaining what they have rightfully lost.

Yours,

The Liberator.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Like a Hell-Broth Boil and Bubble

Rufus heard the Ennervate distantly, as if it were happening in another world. He felt it when someone grasped his arm and pulled him to his feet, though, all the while shouting into his face. “Minister! Minister! Are you all right? Are you awake?”

He opened his eyes then, blinking, and the first thing he saw was the glittering corridor that stretched through the tunnel beside him and, doubtless, up and on through the Ministry. He grimaced. Then he touched a hand to his face, turned to face the Auror shouting at him, and snapped, “Yes, yes, I’m awake.”

The man backed down, abashed. Rufus turned an eye on the corridor again, and cast a Reducto at it. It bounced, and he barely had time to get out of the way as it did. Rufus shook his head. Harry, I don’t doubt that you used this to rescue your people, but why did you have to leave it here? I’m going to have to turn to the Unspeakables to rid us of it. That will put me further in their debt.

“The damage?” he demanded of the Auror next to him.

The man had pulled himself together enough by then to make a useful report, at least. “Forty-two prisoners missing from Tullianum, sir,” he said, “including the last capture, Hawthorn Parkinson. You and your guards stunned. Several Aurors with minor wounds from tripping on a staircase.” His face flushed as Rufus stared at him. It sounds ridiculous said aloud, Rufus thought, no matter how legitimate the cause may have been. “Madam Bones was tied and left in a Body-Bind, while her face was painted to look like a clown’s. We don’t know what the purpose of that was, other than to humiliate her. And of course there were—some of us blinded in the Atrium when the attack began, but we’re recovered, now.” He smoothed a hand down the front of his robes and refused to meet Rufus’s eyes, again. “There’s a lot of damage on the fourth level, in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Centaurs were there.”

“Centaurs.” Rufus’s voice was flat.

The Auror nodded miserably. Rufus wondered if they'd drawn lots for which one had to approach him and tell him this. "Yes. They seem to have appeared in the Ce—Centaur Office, sir. They galloped up and down the halls and kicked in doors and windows and broke furniture, but they didn't kill anyone."

Rufus closed his eyes and shook his head. "Go to the entrance of the Department of Mysteries," he ordered. "Fetch me the first Unspeakable you see. We'll need to talk to someone about removing this corridor."

The Auror sketched a little half-bow and darted away. Rufus rubbed a hand across his face and stared at the tunnel again. Harry had achieved exactly what he came here for, he didn't doubt, getting his prisoners out and doing it with a minimum of casualties. That certain other humiliating things had happened, like his own Stunning and Amelia's embarrassment, were incidental, distractions or the fortunes of rebellion. They could be hushed up, Rufus hoped.

What could not and would not be hushed up was the extent to which Harry's invasion was a thumbing of his nose to the Ministry. That had to be stamped on quickly, or it would encourage others to think they could get away with flouting the law.

And it meant Harry would have to be declared an outlaw and a fugitive, along with all the werewolves he harbored.

Rufus felt a great weariness rising up in him. Things would have been so much easier if Harry had come to him and they had talked this out like rational wizards. He understood that Harry didn't like the hunting season, but in another month or two, Rufus would have gained some control in the Wizengamot and persuaded them to scrap that edict. Harry had just destabilized things so utterly that Rufus wondered if he would be able to gain control any time in the next half a year.

But he would not get things done by standing around in the tunnel to Tullianum and wondering. He turned and began crisply ordering the former guards on his office door to inspect the damage to the prison, and make sure that Harry hadn't broken the wards on those cells that hadn't opened.

He would control what he could. He might be skating on open water instead of ice now, but he could not allow the wizarding world to fall into chaos. He had seen the fringes of such chaos during the First War with Voldemort. It must never be allowed to happen again.

That had been enlightening.

Rita Skeeter wondered if anyone would notice the difference in her buzzing as she zipped down the corridor and up towards the lift shafts that would take her to the surface. Did beetles sound different when they were smug? She'd never had anyone to tell her that, since there were so few people she'd ever shown her Animagus form to.

She had wondered if it was a good idea, staying close to the Minister instead of trying to follow Harry and his companions when they freed the werewolves. She could have crept onto someone's neck and followed them in their Apparition. On the other hand, the chance was too great that Harry would have anti-Animagus wards up around his secret stronghold, and Rita really didn't want to have to explain herself to an angry vates who could swallow her magic.

But she had stayed close to the Minister, and so heard of Amelia Bones's denigration. It would make the perfect touch to the article that she intended to write for the Prophet and bring out—perhaps tomorrow, perhaps more quickly than that if the Evening Prophet would accept it.

How should I phrase it? Sweet concern? Shocked fear? A touch of malicious amusement? The malicious amusement would fit most readers' image of me, but then they might believe I was pulling it out of thin air. And shocked fear might turn more people against Harry than he, or I, wish.

Sweet concern it is, then.

Rita let her wings do her humming as she flew out of the Ministry and towards the small flat where she kept most of her writing materials.

The wizarding world was boiling, and Rita intended to add to the boil, while striving to keep the cauldron from overflowing. No one thrived when civil war exploded in the streets, but reporters thrived when there were so many interesting stories to keep alive, and so many different sides to them.

She felt more alive than she had in years. She thanked whatever luck or chance or fate had said she was going to live in interesting times. Harry swallowed the last bite of bread and honey, and then began the communication spell. He'd waited until late enough in the evening that he hoped Connor would be alone. If he was in the midst of a dueling practice session or Animagus training with Peter, well, Harry was sorry, but he needed to talk to his brother now.

The warble of phoenix song lasted only a moment before Connor's impatient voice said, "Harry?"

Harry smiled, then remembered that his brother couldn't see him and put the smile into his words. "Connor. Hello."

"We heard about the attack on the Ministry," said Connor. "It's in the Prophet already. Are you all right? Did you get everyone out? Are they all right? Did you know that Malfoy ran away somewhere?"

"We got everyone out we went there for," said Harry. "And some we didn't. There were a few wounded, none fatally." His broken rib had been the worst of those casualties, though, which humbled him. There were times that he felt he didn't deserve such good fortune. "And I don't know what you mean about Draco, Connor. He's right here with me." He glanced across the room, to where Draco was sitting on a bench and earnestly talking with his mother. He hadn't left her side for long since Narcissa had arrived. Harry suspected that he was just stunned and dazed that his mother had actually chosen him, and had to make sure of her with every press of her hand and every stare into her eyes.

He finally noticed Connor's silence. "Connor?" he asked, wondering if he shouldn't speak himself. Perhaps someone else had come into the room, and Connor had to hide that he was receiving a message from his brother.

"Harry, I—" Connor cleared his throat awkwardly. "I was so sure that he wasn't going to support you. He didn't say anything about Mrs. Parkinson's arrest or the hunting season for three days. Do you know why?"

"His father threatened to disown him if he supported me," said Harry. "So he kept his mouth shut. Then he made his choice, and then he came to me. That's the whole of it, Connor." His own, private emotions, those that had made him wonder how he would endure this without Draco at his side, were his to keep.

"Oh." Connor's voice was subdued. "I never thought of that. Parvati said he was probably disloyal to you, that he must be, if he couldn't even tell me why he was keeping silent."

Harry quelled a surge of irritation. It was unworthy of a vates, but one reason he was thankful this rebellion had happened was to remove him from an environment where Connor and Draco would do nothing but argue. "Well, now you know what's true," he said, and made his voice cheerful. "How is Peter? The others?"

"Still in shock, I think," said Connor. "Everyone at dinner was discussing the article, but no one knew what to make of it. I heard a few people say that you were a villain, and a few people say you were a hero, but someone always shouted them down. Then the shouting person didn't know what to say when someone asked them for their opinion. I think you just managed to shock a big portion of the wizarding population, Harry." His voice had a dryness on the end of the statement that Harry thought he'd picked up from Peter.

"Well, they can take a few more blows, then," Harry muttered. "I'm going to be sending letters out tomorrow."

"To who?" Connor asked.

"The Minister, for starters." Harry stretched his right arm out and shook it as it cramped. Even the kitchen in Woodhouse wasn't that large, and sitting as close as he was to Camellia, he didn't have much

room. "Telling him what terms I'm offering to come back into the fold and act like a good little boy."

Connor made a choking noise. Then he said, "But, Harry, you were the one who started this rebellion."

Harry blinked. "And? Your point?"

"Aren't you supposed to be the one listening to terms?" Connor asked. "Not offering them?"

Harry laughed aloud. Camellia gave him an anxious glance and a sniff. She seemed to be under the impression that he needed someone keeping track of his scent and his emotional state at all times. Harry didn't know why. He let his hand rest on her shoulder while he spoke to Connor. "I'm sure the Minister will think the same thing, Connor. Quite frankly, though, everything about this rebellion is unusual. I don't think the Ministry has ever faced something like this. On the other hand, it didn't do anything this stupid, either. So I'll tell the Minister what I want, which includes the scrapping of the hunting season. If he can do that, I don't really have a reason not to surrender and come back and stop this. I don't want to tear the wizarding world apart. I'm not committed to civil war for its own sake, or rebellion because I think myself personally wronged. I'm committed to revolution, and mental revolution above all. The Minister managing to do what I ask of him would be sufficient to show that he's moving in that direction."

"I'm worried about you," said Connor, sounding subdued again.

"Why?" Harry could feel contentment rushing through his body. He didn't know why anyone should be worried about him. Other than the tenderness over his broken rib, everything since he arrived back in Woodhouse had gone according to plan. He'd talked to people, defused fights, showed the werewolves where they should go, and been happy as he only was when he was busy. The images of everyone squabbling were fading away. Most of the people in Woodhouse seemed to realize that endless arguments would only drain their energy, and were, at worst, talking to each other in cold voices.

"Because I don't know what's going to happen next," said Connor. "Will you get out of this alive? Will you have the chance to tell the Minister your terms? Everything's so uncertain, Harry. At least with the Midsummer battle, we had a plan. Here, I don't think you do."

"I'm doing what I can, such as protecting the werewolves," said Harry. "From what you described at Hogwarts, no one else is any more sure than I am. The trick is not to get panicked over it. We're in freefall right now, Connor, but I have wings."

Connor was quiet again. Then he said, "All right. I love you, Harry. I hope things work out."

"They will," said Harry. "And if anyone gives you grief because you're my brother, Connor, go to Peter or McGonagall. Both of them will protect you from curses or attacks."

"I know that!"

Harry laughed again at the indignant tone in his brother's voice. "Making sure you did. Good night, Connor. Sleep well." He ended the communication spell, and then leaned forward around the edge of the bench, slowly scanning the room until he spotted the person he wanted. He was speaking with Rose and Trumpetflower, snarling at something they'd said.

"Evergreen?" Harry called. "Could I talk to you for a moment?" Connor rolled over on his bed, tucked his arm around his face, and lay there breathing.

He had never imagined, not once in a thousand years, that Malfoy had gone to Harry when he disappeared. He thought his father had pulled him out of school. It would fit the silence that Malfoy had maintained for the days before his vanishing. He was trying to distance himself from Harry, appear as neutral as possible, and then he would retreat to safety. Political power games were one thing, Connor had thought, but rebellion was another, and Lucius Malfoy

must have commanded his son not to support Harry. And of course Draco had obeyed.

Except that he hadn't. Except that disownment, if Lucius Malfoy had done everything he could—and Connor was sure he could—meant that Draco had lost his father's support, his family's support, his money, and the sanctuary of Malfoy Manor and any other properties.

His reasons for keeping silent even made sense.

And it sounded as though Harry didn't have a single doubt of Draco's loyalty, so this wasn't some ploy to get close to him just to increase the power of his family in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. Draco might be clever, but Connor thought Harry was cleverer. If there had been some hole in Draco's story, some lie, then he would have seen it.

Connor pushed his face into his pillow, and let out a sigh that, even to him, sounded huffy. He hated having to apologize. It made his mouth taste nasty.

Now, though, he thought he would feel worse if he didn't apologize. He had sworn the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, just like Draco had. One of them was to think as rationally as possible, not to let one's thoughts be overtaken by fear. And what had he done? Reacted against Draco out of fear, influenced by Parvati's fear of him as a Dark wizard. Parvati wasn't afraid of Harry, except if he lost his temper, because she knew that he used Light magic too, but Draco was a different matter. Parvati had been raised on stories of how Malfoys, and Dark wizards in general, tortured their enemies. And Lucius Malfoy had been a Death Eater.

I suppose Draco might have it in him to torture someone, too, Connor thought. But if he did it, it would be for Harry's sake. And I don't think he would. Harry would throw him out of the Alliance if he found out about it.

So he had to eat crow.

Connor grimaced. He'd speak to Draco tomorrow, then. That would give him some time to swallow his pride. And tonight, he would go to Parvati and tell her that they'd been wrong.

He wasn't looking forward to that conversation, but hiding from it wasn't something a Gryffindor would do, so he swung himself off his bed and went to do his duty.

Harry closed the door behind them. He and Evergreen stood in a narrow room, one of the closets of Woodhouse, and wards already sparkled on the walls, shutting off anyone from hearing what they'd talk about. Harry turned to face the young werewolf squarely, and met his eyes.

Evergreen glanced away at once. Harry knew that was a good sign. A direct stare would be a challenge, and that would mean that Evergreen hadn't accepted him as alpha.

"I freed you because Rose asked," he said. "And because I assumed that you bit Elder Gillyflower because Loki asked you to, not because you want to run around biting people. If you do, then I'll have no problem confining you and assigning guards to watch you. I wouldn't leave a werewolf there for the Unspeakables to experiment on. That doesn't mean I'm willing to let a monster run free."

"Have no fear," said Evergreen. His voice was humble for the first time. Harry was reminded of the way that Camellia would put on a false face of snarling, snapping bravado in front of other people, and then show her worry when they were alone. "I did that because it was the best way, the only way, to get people to pay attention to us, and because Loki asked me to. You have a different way, and you're my alpha now, human or not. I'll follow you." He turned back to Harry. "Can I—approach and sniff you? The others saw Loki transfer his power. I only heard about it. It would help if I could smell it for myself."

Harry nodded, and Evergreen strode forward and bent his head to sniff carefully about Harry's neck. Harry watched him without fear. Evergreen was his own age, and besides, he'd been born Muggle. If he did try to bite, Harry could pin him to the wall with magic. There was no way he could fight back.

Evergreen stepped away from Harry at last, and dropped to one knee. Harry felt his face heat up. "There's no need to do that," he began, reaching his hand out.

"There is, for me," said Evergreen. "My devotion to Loki was always extreme, because he helped me. He helped all of us. He was the only alpha who moved on helping werewolves, rather than just hiding a pack and hoping the hunters or the curious would pass them by and they could live their lives in peace. But now you've come and freed us from prison, and you've insisted that your human allies treat us well." He clasped Harry's hand and pressed his cheek to it, his eyes staring up at him with no trace of mockery. "I owe you devotion as deep as that I gave to Loki."

Harry's happiness had vanished, and he felt a tingling ache begin in his scar. "Please," he said quietly. "I—I am glad that you won't do something like bite Elder Gillyflower again, and that the transfer of alphas has gone well for you, but please, please don't kneel to me."

"Why not?"

Harry had no notion how to explain the mixture of panic and disgust churning in his belly without making it sound as though he hated Evergreen, so he simply shrugged. "It makes me feel uncomfortable," he said, and Evergreen accepted that.

"Then I will not." He stood back up and stared into Harry's eyes for a moment more. "You should know, vates, that, whether I kneel to you or not, I do plan to fight to the death for you."

He left the room. Harry put his hand over his eyes and breathed shallowly for a few moments.

He thought about casting *Extabesco plene* on himself while he went to write his letter to Scrimgeour, but he knew that would make his allies panic when they couldn't find him. He couldn't just order them out of bowing and kneeling and making declarations of devotion and loyalty, either, since that would be contrary to their free will, and he didn't even have a solid reason for it.

But he did wish, violently, for a moment, that all of what they wanted to do could be accomplished with simple actions and words, and without gestures.

Harry shook his head, smoothed his discomfort back into determination, and went to work on his letter to the Minister. He planned to show it to several people before he sent it. He would want Narcissa's perspective, to see how well it used diplomatic language, and he would want Hawthorn's, to make sure he was not leaving out an injustice. He might have been tempted to consult with Hawthorn alone, but he feared she was too vengeance-obsessed to see straight.

Once he had the letter written, he would send copies to the Maenad Press and the Daily Prophet and Mr. Lovegood at the Quibbler. He had no idea if Scrimgeour would actually announce the contents of the letter, and he wanted to make sure the rest of the wizarding world knew what it would take to end his rebellion.

"It's insolent," said Percy firmly. "After everything you did to support him, and he sends you a letter like this?"

Rufus shook his head. He didn't have the words to describe the letter Harry had sent him, and, apparently, all three major newspapers. He read it again, in the hope that doing so might give him the words to answer.

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I do not claim to speak for all werewolves, or all magical creatures. The only ones I can speak for specifically are those who have joined me in this rebellion and given me leave to reveal their presence. For those, and for the wizards and witches who have tired of seeing injustice and chosen to join the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, I raise my voice now.

We do not demand changes so sweeping and immediate that they would provoke only opposition. The Ministry has changed its position towards magical creatures several times over the last century, and some of those changes have even been positive. We are willing to

work with you, and with the other witches and wizards who have more traditional stances on the matter, to solve the problems.

But the hunting season must end. We cannot tell what rights the Ministry will take away next. If they hate magical creatures who are human for ninety percent of the year, what is to stop them from making similar, and worse, mistakes with centaurs, or goblins, or house elves? Why is the Ministry's first course to panic and imprison them, and the second to declare legalized murder, instead of attempting to supply them with Wolfsbane and search for a cure? Prejudice and hatred can be the only conclusions.

Likewise, there must be serious attempts at negotiation with magical creatures who are free of the webs. The northern goblins are free. They have little interest in the wizarding world, but if wizards do want to trade with them for work in metal or stone, they will demand equal terms to those given human craftsmen. There is no reason this should not be granted. A good faith effort by the Ministry would involve establishing a new committee to begin the negotiations, rather than assigning the goblins to deal with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, the very name of which is insulting.

The centaurs who dwelt in the Forbidden Forest are free. They changed their nature so as not to rape when their web ended. However, they would still find themselves unwelcome in many cases. A good faith effort by the Ministry would involve sending representatives to the Forbidden Forest to speak with the centaurs, listen to their story, and decide how they should be integrated into the British wizarding world, or how they should live separately if they decide to do so.

We do not intend to simply campaign for the freedom of those Dark creatures who need to be negotiated with more carefully—for example, giants, sirens, and dragons. Voldemort loosing sirens and giants on Britain without a care only shows that he is no vates, and that our goals are far from his of causing chaos, misery, and despair. As for dragons, the case of each species, and even some individuals of each species, must be handled carefully, and the statutes that keep Muggles ignorant of their existence worked around.

For any bound reptilian species, including wyverns, Harry vates offers to serve as a translator from Parseltongue. For others, centaurs and goblins, who speak both the human tongues and have education in other ways of communicating, stand ready. Barriers of language cannot be allowed to lie in the way, either as obstruction or excuse.

If and when the Ministry can promise equal protection for werewolves under the law, and a fair trial for any accused of crimes beyond bearing the lycanthropy web, the wrongly-imprisoned from Tullianum will be pleased to return to the wizarding world.

The Ministry's rights over our lives ended when they declared murder legal. We require not only a reversal of that declaration, but a commitment to keeping it forbidden. We offer rational arguments. We do not desire to be met with irrationality.

Signed,

Harry vates and the Alliance of Sun and Shadow.

Rufus shook his head, a grim smile on his lips. This time, though, he didn't feel the weariness he had felt yesterday; he felt impatience instead, and skepticism mixed with sarcasm.

Does Harry really think this is going to force anyone to move? They'll react badly, and they'll insist that he come in for trial, where before they were afraid of his magic. Fear turned to stubbornness and mixed with anger is a volatile liquid that must be handled carefully, and Harry isn't here to stir the pot.

On that note, Rufus had visitors to deal with, people he wouldn't have had to give the time of day to yesterday. But twenty-four hours could change a great deal, and not always for the better. Rufus wished Harry had remembered that lesson, or that someone had taught it to him.

"Mr. Weasley." Percy looked up, practically hovering on his toes. He hadn't stopped reading his copy of the Prophet and muttering darkly

under his breath; Rufus was glad to give him something different to do. "Please show Mrs. Whitestag and Mr. Willoughby into the office."

Percy nodded and strode across the room, flinging his door open. Rufus smoothed his face into the expression of polite interest that he wore for most visitors like this—the occasional pureblood with a mad idea who managed to win access to him because of money or influence.

This time, though, only one of them was a pureblood. The other was a Muggle backed by purebloods who found him a useful tool. And thanks to Harry's little stunt yesterday, Rufus would have to take their words far more seriously than he would have otherwise.

Aurora Whitestag entered first. Rufus regarded her warily. She concerned him more, and not just because she knew more about the wizarding world than Willoughby, and there was no sign that she was a tool like he was. She believed in what she was saying, enough to stand by it, and there was no sign that she was a fanatic. At worst, she would become another level-headed revolutionary like Harry. Rufus didn't want any more of them. One was enough for his people to deal with. The only thing he could be thankful for was that Whitestag was not a Lady.

Philip Willoughby followed her. He looked less steady than the first time Rufus had met him, but months of being a grieving father and not accomplishing what he set out to do would take their toll on anyone. His hazel eyes had deep marks of exhaustion under them, and he sat in his chair like a sack of potatoes. It didn't surprise Rufus when Whitestag spoke for both of them.

"Minister, you know that we've joined forces to propose a monitoring board for young Harry." She waited until he nodded, then leaned forward. "We have enough support to begin it now, we think. Several members of the Wizengamot have agreed to be part of the board, including Griselda Marchbanks."

Rufus blinked several times. That was a surprise. Marchbanks was a staunch ally of Harry's, as far as he knew. Perhaps she did think

Harry needed restraint and supervision, or perhaps she was agreeing so that Harry could have one friend on the monitoring board.

"It's a little hard to see how it would be set up now, ma'am," he told her. "Given that Harry is in hiding and in rebellion against the Ministry."

Whitestag smiled. She had dark eyes and dark hair, and pale skin, and an air of certainty. She was the kind of woman Rufus might have been drawn to himself, twenty or so years ago. "Oh, we're talking about when he comes back," she said. "And he will come back, Minister. He knows he's too important to our world to stay in hiding forever. He's the Boy-Who-Lived. We need him. And say what you will about Harry, I think he has a very strong sense of duty."

Rufus reevaluated her again. Whitestag had clearly picked up more about Harry than had come through in her rare Prophet interviews. That only made her more dangerous, of course. Rufus did not want Harry caged. Part of that was personal fondness, but more of it was certainty that that would involve more mucking around in his Ministry when Harry saw the cages and chains and broke free of them.

"He does," Rufus said slowly. "But what makes you think he would agree to this monitoring board? He also has a very strong sense of independence, and it's only got stronger. I don't think a boy who would plan a battle at Hogwarts all by himself with the help of a few allies will take kindly to someone looking over his shoulder."

"He will if we make it part of the bargain for his coming back into the wizarding world in good standing," said Whitestag. Willoughby muttered something about the battle and how his daughter might have lived if someone had been there to rein Harry in. Whitestag ignored him. "That sense of duty, Minister. His followers won't stand for something as dramatic as a trial, or Harry being arrested and sent to Tullianum, and I don't think he will, either. But a monitoring board? A small sacrifice that will also insure he has adult counselors, ones who have good reason to fear his running wild?" She tilted her head and smiled. "I think he will."

“He does have a guardian,” Rufus told her. “Professor Severus Snape. And I believe that Headmistress McGonagall take something of an affectionate interest in the boy as well.”

“We saw that when we came to talk to her,” said Willoughby darkly.

Whitestag put a calming hand on his arm and glanced at Rufus again. “But we’ve been listening to reports from Hogwarts, sir, in the form of children whose brothers and sisters died in the attack,” she said. “They say that Professor Snape is barely able to teach his own classes now, and may soon retire or go into seclusion altogether. Emotional problems. And Headmistress McGonagall, admirable as she is, has a whole school to look after. If she had been willing to abandon her responsibilities, she would have gone into exile after the boy. We certainly cannot send Harry back to his parents, not when he renounced them, and not with the way they have treated him. Nor do those friends and allies he has surrounded himself with seem adequate to give him guidance. I believe custody of Harry should be taken away from Severus Snape and shared between the monitoring board, Headmistress McGonagall, and those of his friends and allies who are most trustworthy. We would have to interview them, of course.”

Rufus hid his alarm. He had heard nothing of Snape’s degradation. “It’s an interesting idea, Mrs. Whitestag,” he said, “but I’m afraid I’d have to think more about it before giving you a definite answer.”

Her smile brightened her face. “Of course, sir.” She stood, her head half-bowed. “If anyone has been patient in the face of enormous provocation from Harry, you have been. We lost our children, but I have come to see our losses more and more in the pattern of larger losses for the wizarding world if Harry does not receive the training he needs. He killed our children because he is still half a child himself, being asked to bear burdens we should not have piled onto a teenager’s shoulders. I am doing this for his sake as much as for that of my dead daughter and son.”

Rufus looked into her eyes. He believed her.

And it terrified him.

"I—I will speak with others, Mrs. Whitestag," he said. "In particular, I would like to confirm some of the information you gave me. And then I will talk to you again about what we should do."

She bowed to him, a full formal gesture of the kind that even most purebloods didn't bother with anymore, and then took Willoughby's arm and guided him gently out the door. Rufus wondered if she had brought him to make her case look stronger, or to offer him moral support. It could have been both.

Rufus did not want to see that monitoring board established, even now. It could interfere with Harry's work as vates, and he valued that as an ideal, though he didn't think Harry would go about it in a practical way.

He wondered, though, if Whitestag was right and it would be the only acceptable way to settle the rebellion in the eyes of the wizarding world.

He shook his head, and turned to making sure he got some information on Professor Snape. He doubted the Unspeakables would stop him, any more than they had stopped Whitestag and Willoughby from visiting. They would probably be pleased with the thought of restricting Harry, and they knew he was in their debt for their removal of Harry's tunnel.

Harry concentrated. His magic surged through him in pulsing waves, still touched by tenderness from his broken rib. He pictured them concentrating on the end of his left arm, and then let out a deep breath and the words of the countercurse at the same time.

"Supervenio ad integritas!" It had the force of a shout, though he kept his voice low.

His left wrist shivered, and when Harry opened his eyes, it was to see another curse dissolving from it, melting off in gray strips the color of rain. A slight numbness he'd never noticed existed was suddenly gone. Harry blinked, and felt phantom pain in his missing fingers. He carefully pulled his magic back from his left hand—the book he'd

retrieved the countercurse from said it should be left alone, to recover from the effects of the Dark power—and sat down hard on his bed.

He closed his eyes and allowed himself to bathe in the exaltation for a moment. The third curse broken. Now I need to study before breaking the fourth one. If he could believe the mirrors at the Sanctuary, the next curse was the last preventing him from having a hand, but also the hardest to break. It would take time for him to recognize the pattern in Argutus's scales from any book; the ones he'd looked through so far all had nothing.

He used those moments of recovery time to search his mind for traces of his Animagus form. The only thing he saw, silhouette or not, Peter's lessons or not, was a lynx. Perhaps that meant his mind was still too full of Voldemort's visions, but Harry thought it was more likely to mean that his Animagus form was a lynx, especially because the one he envisioned had four paws instead of three.

He stood in the next moment, and strode outside. He should seek out and soothe the karkadann, who still only allowed him—and a few of the more violent werewolves—to get close to her. She patrolled the valley faithfully, and grazed, and attacked no one, but she had been rushing around Woodhouse yesterday, horn lowered and stabbing at the air. She needed someone to calm her.

He stepped out into sunlight. They had had three days of rain since they rescued the werewolves, but today had decided to be fair, with light sparking from wet needles in the forest and puddles on the ground and flashing spells where Adalrico drilled those werewolves who had wands in dueling. Harry made his way carefully between puddles towards the forest, where the karkadann stood with one foot scraping the ground, staring moodily up at the rock walls that surrounded Woodhouse.

She turned long before he reached her, and uttered a deafening bugle. Harry felt his cheeks flush as people turned to look at him, but at least most of them turned back to their tasks right away. Three days had been enough to dull all but the most fervent gratitude, and get people used to the myriad tasks of being rebels in Wales. Even

the karkadann was no longer as much a point of interest as she had been.

She trotted up to him now, though, head lowered and horn sweeping the air in front of her, madly glad to see him. Her first breath nearly knocked him over, and Harry had to duck to avoid the enormous nose. He felt battle-readiness surge up in him, the result of her voice and breath.

He looked at the karkadann thoughtfully. She backed, her left hind foot stamping. Since she had multiple toes instead of a single hoof, Harry thought, it shouldn't have made that much noise, but it did. The sound reminded him of war-drums.

Harry's gaze went to the sides of the valley. He hadn't seen any Muggles in the area, and a quick touch to the sense of Woodhouse that hovered in the back of his mind confirmed there probably weren't any. Woodhouse's place magic defended it and kept it hidden from those who weren't magical themselves. It would have been settled and used long ago, otherwise.

Harry made up his mind. The karkadann badly needed to run. Without people, Woodhouse was just barely big enough for her. With them, she couldn't gallop without upsetting someone's pet project.

He gestured to the rocky walls, and the great unicorn understood him without a word spoken. She slid to one knee, though, and Harry hesitated for a long moment before he reached out, gripped that shaggy off-white fur, and hauled himself onto her back.

This close, the smell was utterly overwhelming. Harry could smell blood and death and dust and sand. They didn't disgust him. He found himself shouting instead, meaningless noise, just to make himself heard, and leaning down along the line of the karkadann's spine.

She took one step forward, then two, then kicked out and began to really run. Harry saw the valley's cliffs rushing closer and closer, and then she jumped. The hills became blurs of gray and brown and green. She landed with a jolt that reminded Harry of the blow he'd

taken from Falco in their battle—and jostled his still-healing rib—and then turned to the east, surging towards the place where the hills flattened around the forest entrance to Woodhouse.

Harry couldn't remember the last time he'd been this uncaring of what might happen, except on his Firebolt. The karkadann's feet dug deep into the grass and soil, flinging up divots of them that sometimes came high enough to splatter against his robes. In the desert, Harry thought, it would be puffs of hot sand. Her muscles rolled and surged, and Harry reminded himself that karkadanns dueled with rhinos and elephants. The stink surrounded him and soaked into his skin, but it was wild, and, as such, no more repugnant than the musk that hung around werewolves. He bounced and shifted in place, but that was what the firm grip with his hand was for.

And he could feel the joy gathering in her, especially when she came down off the hills and saw the flat expanse of autumn grass in front of them.

She hesitated, prancing.

“Go,” Harry whispered.

As if she actually obeyed his words instead of her own free will, she leaped forward, and Harry heard dirt wash around them and suspected her hind feet had carved a sinkhole this time. He crouched down further, because the wind of their passage was strong enough to become annoying, and stared ahead. The world split into two around the gleaming neck, the proud lifted head, the black corkscrew horn. Harry heard himself laughing, and didn't remember when he'd started doing it.

The karkadann made an odd sound as she galloped, half like a horse's snort and half like a bellow so wild that it made Harry's ears sting and smart. She wheeled around at the end of one charge, nearly sitting down on her hindquarters, and then plunged madly at right angles to her stop. Harry thought he'd slip off for a moment, but instincts honed in Quidditch saved him. He gripped with arms and legs and hand, and the next thing he knew, they were shooting north, the karkadann still safely underneath him.

She lowered her head and hunched her shoulders, and suddenly they were bounding, all her feet leaving the ground at once and coming down together again in one place. Harry's teeth rattled in his head, and he had to fight not to bite his tongue. The karkadann didn't look back at him, or neigh in concern, but kept on doing it. After all, Harry thought, she probably realized he could get off if he didn't like it.

He stayed on.

The karkadann slewed around in a half-turn, and then dug her front legs in and bucked, shooting her hind legs behind her, for no reason other than the fun and the wild pleasure of it. Harry slid to her neck and clung there, then slid backward as she reared on her hind legs and screamed her desire for death and conquering and wind and running to the sky.

Harry, with his heart in this throat and his glasses half-sliding off his face, recalled a snatch of something an ancient Muggle author had once written about karkadanns. "He is never caught alive; killed he may be, but taken he cannot be." The web put on them had proven that author wrong, perhaps, Harry had thought, the first time he read about them.

Now he knew it hadn't. The web might prevent karkadanns from coming in sight of Muggles or going where they wanted to, but the beast underneath Harry at that moment was tameless. She would only come to someone's hand because she wanted to. She screamed her freedom to the whole world and didn't care who knew it.

When she dropped from her rear, with a satisfied snort that shook the earth, she turned her head to the side and waited. Harry leaned out, reaching sideways far enough to touch her ear.

She smelled of ferocity and freedom. Harry met the black eyes and wondered how many times it had been the last sight some other person or creature ever saw.

"You're magnificent," he whispered. "You are."

The karkadann gave another snort, agreeing with him.

Harry carried on stroking her ear for a time, until she turned and trotted back towards Woodhouse. She jumped casually from the side of the hill into the valley, shaking several people from their feet and making some of the water in the puddles leap a dozen feet in the air. Harry shrugged when his people glared at him, but couldn't find it in his heart to be really sorry. He was alive again, his blood galloping around in his veins as if it had four feet and a horn as well.

He slipped off the karkadann's back. She went to graze, snapping her lion-like tail in a whipping half-caress around his shoulders on the way. Harry shook his head, grinning, and wondered what in the world he had done to deserve company like this.

An owl dipped down towards him, and he was temporarily distracted. He opened it, and blinked when he read the contents.

October 3rd, 1996

Dear Harry:

This letter is to inform you that Auror Edmund Wilmot is still working in the Ministry. He originally prepared to flee from his post when he believed that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement would use a spell to locate all werewolves, but they have not so far released the spell, perhaps for lack of people to capture the revealed lycanthropes. Therefore, he will remain as an Auror and pass information along. He knows that you could use a spy there. The main plot he has overheard talk of so far is of a monitoring board, controlled by the parents of the Dozen Who Died, to watch over you. Also, the Minister had to resort to calling on the Unspeakables to get rid of your corridor.

He believes he has a foolproof method to slip his owls out of the Ministry. He will give more information as it becomes available.

Peregrine.

Harry shook his head again, dazed. Peregrine was one of the alphas of the London packs, one who had agreed to bring her people to

shelter under Harry and was making arrangements to do so, and, presumably, the alpha Wilmot would have gone to.

For Wilmot to remain in place, in the face of intense danger, to do this for the sake of the rebellion...

Harry felt another surge of awe and wonder and gratitude. Why are such people helping me? What have I done to deserve this?

With the feeling that life was, at the moment, wonderful, he went to take a shower to remove the sweat, and then write another letter to the Minister. Four days without a response was too long.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Master of the Rising Tension

Draco shut the door quietly behind him.

Not quietly enough, it seemed. A moment ago, Draco would have said Harry was completely absorbed in the letter on his knee, but he blinked and looked up. "Draco?" he asked, shoving his glasses up with his hand and causing the letter to almost drift to the floor. His Levitation Charm snatched it up and put it back, but Harry grumbled about losing his place before he said, "Is something wrong?"

Draco frowned, then reminded himself what he'd come here for. Harry had only finished riding the karkadann half an hour ago. Draco had given him some time to shower, but, he hoped, not shed the joyful mood entirely. Harry had been open to kissing him in joyful moods before. And Draco had only had to glimpse his face, flushed and laughing from the ride, before a sharp spike of want had made him remember what he'd promised Harry in the Ministry corridor.

"Of course not," said Draco. "Why should something be wrong when I only wanted to spend time with my boyfriend?"

Harry obviously didn't assign any innuendo to that statement, because he smiled. "Nothing. But you've been talking to your mother almost since she arrived, so I thought she might have dismissed you because her ear's getting tired."

It was true that Narcissa had been in his thoughts and at his side since she arrived, Draco thought, but that had only been his wonder at the thought that she had chosen him, after all. He had thought from the time he was a child that his mother and father were, while not identical, joined; seeing one break away from the other had been an impossible concept to grasp. If he chose against one, he would be choosing against the other. And now here his mother was. Small wonder he had wanted to talk to her, to hear all the details of her duel with Lucius, to know exactly what was happening and realize again how much she loved him.

He realized Harry had turned back to his letter while he was distracted, and frowned again. He stepped closer and took the letter

out of Harry's hand. Harry squawked like Granger as that resulted in a long trail of ink down the side of the parchment, and glared at him.

"Draco, that letter is to the Minister—"

Draco bent down and kissed him, pushing Harry onto his back before he knew what was happening. He didn't exactly want to bed Harry in irritation, but he could use the emotion to begin this. And the moment he had skin under his hands, and the memory of Harry's flushed face in his head, his thoughts narrowed and oriented towards one point. He wanted this, damn it.

They'd both come alive out of the Ministry jailbreak, they'd done it with no casualties other than a few wounds, and Draco had Stunned the Minister and saved Harry from having to fight him. That deserved some bedding, Draco thought.

Harry hissed, though, and the sound wasn't a noise of irritation, but of pain. Draco sat back at once. Is there something in his training that makes him react to being pinned like this?

He realized the truth when Harry sat up, massaging his right side, where the rib had broken. Draco stared. "I thought you took a healing potion for that?" he demanded.

Harry gave him a strange look. "Of course I did. But it was a broken rib. The Bone-Set could only heal the break, not ease all the pain. It's going to be fragile and tender for a few days."

"It's been a few days since then." Draco was unable to keep the pettiness out of his voice. Even though it had been his fault as much as Harry's that they'd shared the same bed for the last few nights, but only for sleeping, and spent their days doing entirely different things, he wanted this now. He shifted uncomfortably, and saw Harry's gaze dart to his groin.

"You get aroused fast," Harry said.

"We're hanging a mirror next time," said Draco. "So that you can see yourself and understand why I get aroused so quickly."

Harry's flush deepened to the color of red clay. He stood and reached out, clasping Draco's hand. "Listen, Draco," he said softly. "I'm hurt, but it won't last forever. In a few more days, at most, it should be entirely healed. It already feels better than it did yesterday. Can you wait that long?"

Draco nodded reluctantly. He supposed that he could always ask Harry to wank him in the meantime, but he wanted more than that—he wanted to see Harry entirely naked, for one thing, which hadn't happened since Harry had faced Voldemort in the Chamber of Secrets and won—and anything less would feel like settling. Draco didn't want to settle. He intended to push.

"Good." Harry squeezed his hand. "I am sorry about this, you know."

Draco looked steadily into Harry's eyes. They shone earnestly back at him. And Draco could see that, yes, he was sorry—

To not be able to give Draco what he wanted.

"Do you want this, Harry?" Draco demanded abruptly. "If your rib was healed, would you go along because you want to bed me, or because this is a gift you can offer me?"

Harry's flush deepened again. "Both," he said. "I do like—watching you, Draco." Draco considered demanding that he say the words, but that would only tie up Harry's tongue, and he needed it to say the words Draco wanted to hear. "You're beautiful when you feel that much pleasure in a way that you aren't at other times. Not that you're never beautiful at other times," he hastened to add.

"I know," said Draco, holding up a hand. "I know what you mean, Harry. But there's a more pertinent question, I think. How much does your own pleasure factor into this? Not how much you like watching me come, but how much you like getting off." He was remembering the time Harry had brought him to climax and then arranged Draco on his chest afterwards; it had been warm and pleasant and had already taken its place as one of Draco's favorite memories, but now what he

was especially remembering was the way Harry had said, "I'll be fine," when he attempted to return the favor.

Harry was looking away to one side, and wouldn't meet his eyes.

"It's less important," he said.

Draco stifled a growl, then wondered why he was bloody well doing that and released it. He had promised Harry that he was going to push. "Why?"

"It's not a problem of feeling good," said Harry, not looking at him. "It's not. I liked it fine when we were at Silver-Mirror. It's just—I thought about it afterwards, and I didn't like the feeling of collapsing like that. I don't like the feeling of letting all my barriers down at once."

Draco saw the problem almost at once. The point in the last few months when Harry had seemed most relaxed was at the Sanctuary, in the pool where Draco had massaged his shoulders. On the other hand, both times he'd bedded Draco had been intense, hurried experiences, full of emotion, with Harry not really relaxed, no matter how content he'd been afterwards.

"I wish you had told me about this before," said Draco, trying and failing to keep the frustration out of his voice. "I could have helped, Harry."

Harry gave him a sad smile. "In the midst of all this?" His hand-wave took in not only Woodhouse but also the rebellion, Draco knew. "We've both been busy, and you've been coping with extremes of emotion in the last few days. I didn't think your mother would join us, either. Besides, I don't think of it as a problem—"

"I bloody well do."

Harry gave him a sideways look. "The answer to this will probably seem obvious the moment I ask it, but I don't care. Why, Draco?"

Draco shook his head. He didn't have the words to explain just why he wanted to see Harry entirely naked, taking as much pleasure from their bedding as Draco did. He just knew that he did.

So he said that. "Because I want that to happen, Harry." He shifted, deliberately drawing Harry's eyes to his groin again. "I don't consider it bedding if you just wank or suck me off for the rest of our lives. I want to fuck you, too, you know."

"It wouldn't be the rest of our lives," said Harry. "We're just a little busy right now—"

"We always will be," said Draco. "I know that you're vates, Harry; you were that before I fell in love with you. I've put up with the notion that I have to share you with your goals and your allies and all kinds of magical creatures. But you have to share them with me, too. That means that I won't suffer being put off forever. And if I did let you do that, we'd fall into some comfortable 'compromise' I'd wake up from and hate years later. No. We're going to live at the same time as we're rebelling." He raked Harry's body with a deliberately lingering look that Harry glanced aside from. "Your rib has to heal completely, of course. But until then, I want you to think about the fact that your own pleasure matters to me as much as mine does."

"Draco—" Harry's words were a plea, now.

"No arguments on that score, Harry," Draco said pleasantly, though his heart was pounding hard and he couldn't tell what emotion was uppermost in him. Anger? Determination? Bloody-minded stubbornness? "I'm not taking a sacrifice to bed. That's not appealing to me in the slightest."

He turned and stepped out of the room, shutting the door behind him again and trying to convince himself that that had been worthwhile, after all. He'd nipped something in the bud that he might have ignored in a haze of desire and then regretted afterwards—

Who am I kidding?

Draco sighed and went to find one of Woodhouse's small rooms to cast wards and Silencing Charms around. He had come to important realizations, yes, but none of that impacted the arousal that Harry had inspired in him and which wasn't going to be truly satisfied for at least the next few days.

Harry managed to finish the letter to the Minister, though his thoughts kept bouncing back to what Draco had said to him. At last he laid the parchment aside and ran his hand through his hair. He couldn't send it right now, anyway. He wanted Narcissa, Hawthorn, and Adalrico to look over it first.

How can I make Draco see that this isn't a sacrifice for me? I just—I just have problems relaxing to that extent, and there's no reason that should prevent him from experiencing pleasure.

Harry had assumed it was one more thing, like the taste of porridge or chocolate, that mattered to him and him alone, and since he didn't care that much about it, then no one else should care that much about it, either. But Draco did seem to care about it, and given his newfound pushiness, he would shove and worry at it, Harry knew, until they reached a point where Harry gave Draco what he wanted.

And what I do want, too, what it would be pleasant to have, but not as desperately as he seems to want it.

Harry shook his head. This was getting him nowhere, and the thoughts were distracting him from important things. He transformed the impulse to lie there and let the worries inside his head have free rein to the impulse to take care of those important things, and snatched the letter.

The request it contained was simple. It wanted to know why the Minister had not yet responded to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow and their demands for werewolf legal rights. Surely, outlawing murder was not that hard a decision? Even a small gesture of good faith would content them, for now. But so far, there had only come this cold silence, and that made the Alliance think the Ministry was dithering.

Harry suspected that Scrimgeour was probably grateful for the silence, and for the fact that so many factions in the Ministry had no idea how to respond. And he wouldn't thank Harry for pushing.

Harry didn't care. The silence wouldn't endure. If he gave his enemies time to rebuild their anthill, then they would inevitably come to conclusions that sounded good but which decided against his people. So he would do what rebels were supposed to do, and kick over the anthill again.

Time to set this to boiling, he thought, and sought out Narcissa. Narcissa Malfoy was a very long way from stupid. The only arena of her life in which she would admit to, perhaps, carrying things too far was her grudge against her sister Andromeda, which had lasted through years of silence and years of sniping letters. Their communication had grown coldly courteous again in the last few months, as Narcissa coaxed Andromeda to come out openly for Harry; she nearly had in the summer before Harry's fourth year, but then retreated when she and Narcissa fell out and she discovered how close Harry was to Narcissa. And now the owls in the last few days had been warmer than ever, because Andromeda did care that her beloved daughter had decided to join Harry's rebellion. Very much.

That intelligence meant that she could take one look at Harry when he held out his latest letter to the Minister, and say, "You had an argument with my son, didn't you?"

Harry flushed. "Not so much an argument as a—clash of words," he said, and shook the letter. "Please, Mrs. Malfoy, it's important."

"What about?" Narcissa asked as she took the parchment. Harry's deepening blush gave her the clue. She paused, wondering what advice to give. Bellatrix would have laughed and made filthy jokes, Andromeda would have been delicately blunt, but she was neither of their sisters. Besides, neither of them had produced a son, or married a Malfoy.

“I’ll tell you this now, Harry,” she said. “Draco loves you. He may be devious, but he would not force you to do something that made you uncomfortable simply because it pleased him. He wants to please you, as well. And there is nothing wrong—nothing—with indulging your own taste for pleasure.”

“Mrs. Malfoy, please.” Harry had backed away a few steps by now, and had his head down. “Please, will you read the letter?”

“I told you to call me Narcissa,” she chided him gently as she held the parchment open on her lap. She sat on a bench in one of the narrow corridors of Woodhouse, the better to observe what was happening everywhere and note the stirrings of arguments and dissension. So far, no one had expressed serious objections against being here—the freed werewolves, even the ones not originally Harry’s allies, knew the Ministry would not offer them kisses and roses if they betrayed Harry—but Narcissa knew they would come, and she would not let Harry be taken off guard. “And what I say is true. The world will not cease to spin because you think of yourself for once in a while.”

“But I am,” said Harry, lifting his head with a quick, angry jerk. He breathed deeply in the next moment, and all the lines on his forehead smoothed out. Too quickly, Narcissa thought. Unnaturally. “I’m making sure I eat and sleep on time, ma’am. I do use a sleeping charm if I’m prone to lie awake and let my thoughts race around my head. I don’t exhaust myself trying to fulfill impossible requests. I’m learning to refuse people things I don’t think they should have. I’m becoming what you advised me to be in one of the Starborn letters, someone capable of deciding where my magic should go and what it should do, rather than assuming that I have to be a servant for everyone who asks.”

“This is more than that,” said Narcissa. “This is taking time and happiness for yourself, Harry.” She wondered if she could have had this conversation with any other sixteen-year-old boy in the world. Usually they needed to slow down and be told to remember that other people existed, and their actions affected those people. “No one will curse you if you do that.”

Harry shrugged. “I know that, ma’am.”

“Narcissa.”

“Narcissa,” he agreed, but it was too obviously a concession to her. Narcissa eyed him for a moment, and wondered if she should press the issue.

Then she decided not to. Sometimes, as with Andromeda, one needed to let matters rest. Besides, her son would be better-suited to know when Harry was depriving himself, and much more determined than anyone else to deal with it.

She turned to the parchment, and shook her head, ignoring his soft sigh of relief. “If you want to phrase this as a demand, the first line is too conciliatory, I think.”

“I want it to be more of a request,” said Harry. “The letters can increase in ferocity as they grow on.”

“We may not get that far,” said Narcissa. This, at least, she felt competent to address. “We know that you’re taking this rebellion seriously, but so far, the most impressive thing we’ve done is the Ministry jailbreak, and that will already be fading in its impact on the minds of the public. We need other methods of showing them we’re serious. A demand would do it.”

Harry opened his mouth to argue, and then he spun and stared towards the window. Narcissa followed his gaze, expecting to see an owl, but nothing hovered there. Harry’s magic rose anyway.

“What is it?” Narcissa asked.

“Intruders on the borders of Woodhouse,” said Harry tightly. “It’s telling me about many small rushing things. It doesn’t like them. They may be Aurors or Unspeakables.”

A moment later, a ringing neigh and howls both came through the window, signals from their sentries. Narcissa stood, smoothing down her robes, and then shook her wand into her hand.

“They’re entering,” said Harry, and his magic rose and swamped the building. The next moment, he vanished, and Narcissa suspected he had Apparated directly to the attackers’ side.

She turned and went to warn those who hadn’t heard, and then to find Draco. Her mind drowned fear. They had Harry with them, and they had known it would come to this sooner or later, as long as they were rebels against the Ministry. She was not in the least afraid.

Harry landed on the outer fringes of the pine forest, to find that Woodhouse’s warning had been even more impressive than he thought. The Aurors in question hadn’t fired a spell yet, but they were hostile towards parts of the valley, slapping branches out of the way as they tried to sneak in. Then Woodhouse had picked up on their hostility towards him, and its stance had altered from tolerance of the small rushing things to active annoyance.

Woodhouse would still not attack, given that its place magic would simply defend any stones or trees the Aurors tried to move, but its annoyance could run through Harry, and he could certainly attack.

He reminded himself that intimidating people at the Ministry had stopped anyone from dying. He didn’t know if he would be so lucky here, but he could certainly show off his magic.

He stepped around the tree in front of him and did so.

The air around the dark-robed wizards turned dry. Harry raised his magic as heat, rather than fire, thinking of the deserts the karkadann had run. He murmured a milder version of the dehydration curse Draco had used to save him from the time-globe on the Hogwarts Express, and the witch in front of him started gasping as moisture was sucked from her mouth. He carefully kept the magic away from the trees; since he was part of Woodhouse, the valley presumably wouldn’t hesitate to lash at him if it caught him hurting another part of itself.

Harry let the air around him shimmer, too, and waited, doing nothing more than arch an eyebrow.

The witch in front of him flicked her wand, trying a nonverbal spell. Harry clenched the fingers of his hand, cast a Protego in front of his chest, and then aimed the spell, a stronger dehydration curse, over that. The witch made a soundless cry as the tendons in her hand dried to the consistency of old leather, and her fingers spasmed open and dropped her wand. Whatever hex she had chosen sputtered out against the rocks and needles under her feet.

“Now,” said Harry quietly. “What are you doing here? Tell me that, and I might be persuaded to let you live.” He could feel the karkadann shoving through the pine trees to get to his side, but he didn’t worry. She was at a disadvantage in cover as thick as this. And he could easily use his magic to restrain her from killing anyone, should he deem it necessary.

Someone moved forward from the back of the group—a tall woman with blonde hair sweeping her shoulders, whom Harry recognized. She halted and nodded at him. Then she said, “Karen, you were supposed to inform him he was under arrest first, before you cast a spell. Remember it. I certainly will.”

Karen mouthed something sullen. Harry inclined his head to Priscilla Burke. “Hello,” he said. “The Ministry must consider this important if they send the Head Auror after me and mine.”

The karkadann knocked into another tree behind him and let out a bellow of frustration. Harry stood firm, not letting the temptation to charge when he heard the trumpet overwhelm him. He watched the Head Auror’s face instead, caught in a stream of slanting sunlight. He knew she was not here as Thomas’s wife, because she would have already joined them if that was the case.

“The Ministry has declared you, and everyone who shelters with you, an outlaw,” said Priscilla. “The charges are numerous. Sheltering fugitives, intrusion into and damage of Ministry property, endangering public safety. There were others, but I didn’t bother memorizing them.” She let out a long breath. “The point, vates, is that you should surrender and come with us now.”

“Will my people be properly treated?” Harry asked mildly. “For example, will Mrs. Parkinson be treated like a human being, and not cut with silver, and shoved into a corner of her cell, and left to put on robes torn in her transformation?”

Priscilla jolted as if he had slapped her. “That did not happen,” she whispered.

“Oh, but it did.” Harry took a step forward. “That’s the reason I’m asking for guarantees from the Ministry. I don’t trust them to keep my packs from being murdered. Why in the world would I trust them with anything else?”

“Who did this?” Priscilla said.

Harry shrugged. “Hawthorn said that every single Auror who came after her contributed something to it—slapping her, spitting on her, kicking her, casting pain curses. Something.” He held Priscilla’s eyes, even when they watered as if she were trying to blink, and pulled more and more of his magic close to him, in a thick sheen that made the rest of the forest waver like a mirage. “There were twenty of them. That’s a purging of a good part of your Corps, I think.”

Priscilla closed her eyes and visibly fought for mental balance. Then, as if aware that this would make her look weak in front of her people, she chose a glare. “You don’t—I don’t think you understand. I would like to begin such a purge, and make sure that my own people never treat a prisoner like that again, but I need you back in the public eye to do it. I need to hear Mrs. Parkinson’s testimony, or at least see her memories in a Pensieve, to know who was responsible. If you surrender and come along, then we can quiet some of the public suspicions. So long as everyone is still shouting about werewolves running around and trying to murder us in our beds, nothing we do will make any difference. We have to have a calm environment.”

“Correction,” said Harry. “If we surrender, they’ll think they’ve won. And they’ll make sure that none of the really damaging testimony reaches the outside world.” He looked up as the karkadann finally found the passage through the trees and came to a stop beside him, snorting and stamping. Harry reached up and stroked her shaggy

foreleg, ignoring Priscilla's gape. "And that means the end of our freedom, the end of our chance to change things, and the end of our inspiration for the rest of the wizarding world. My answer to that is no, ma'am, unless we have either action from the Ministry, or binding oaths that swear they won't harm us and try to make us vanish the moment we're in their custody."

"Without your coming back now, it will come to civil war, and not just rebellion," said Priscilla, her voice tight.

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Because people are starting to support you," said Priscilla darkly. "The pages of the Daily Prophet are swarming with letters. In London, several werewolf packs have secured their lairs and prepared to fight any Aurors who arrest them, or anyone else trying to harm them, to the death. Someone else tried to invade the Ministry yesterday, and got away before we could find out who it was. And now we have letters coming in from—from people we can't afford to ignore in France and Spain, asking why the Minister hasn't done something about the Alliance's demands so far, and how they look oh so very reasonable to them." She scowled. "The Americans are doing the same thing, but the Americans always do that. France and Spain are usually quieter."

Harry allowed himself a thin smile. He didn't know much of the British Ministry's reputation abroad, but he could imagine how it had suffered under Fudge. And then it would have had a year of seeming competency under Scrimgeour, only to tremble and explode now. It was no wonder that even Scrimgeour's enemies wanted to stop the Alliance, because they would want a smooth transfer of power. Coups didn't look good on a Ministry's record.

"It doesn't look good, does it?" he asked innocently. "That one rebel can defy the whole of a Ministry armed with permission to use dangerous spells, as well as dangerous magical artifacts?"

Priscilla closed her eyes. "You have no idea what you're dealing with, vates," she said, and then she waved her wand and lifted a privacy ward between them. "I received permission from the Minister himself

to seek you out and try to stop this,” she said. “He was willing to wait before, but the invasion yesterday and the letters from the—the people in France and Spain are unnerving him. Amelia Bones is just about ready to declare war at this point. If you come along now, we’ll avoid that. If you don’t, then we won’t.”

Harry took a deep breath. Then he said, “You and Scrimgeour both seem to think I didn’t know what would happen when I started this rebellion. That’s wrong. I did. I did it to prevent even worse things from happening.”

“You want corpses in the streets?” Priscilla whispered. “You want blood? You want war?”

“I don’t want it,” said Harry. “But that’s what I’m going to get. And without it, we’d have people dying in the street anyway. Their killers would just say they were werewolves later. And we’d have the Department of Mysteries doing whatever the hell it likes, under the guidance of the Stone, and the Ministry shaking apart around Scrimgeour’s ears. He’s got a war of his own to fight, whether he likes it or not. He’s not going to save his Ministry this way, and neither am I. I don’t want to save it. It couldn’t protect the innocent. It didn’t try.”

“War,” Priscilla said. She was hung up on the word, Harry thought. “A rebellion is one thing. A war is another.”

“Revolution is a more frightening word than either.” Harry smiled so hard his face hurt. “And I’m committed to it. I told the Minister I was. I can’t understand why people don’t take me seriously. Perhaps because I’m sixteen.” He heard branches twitching and snapping behind him, and hoped to Merlin that his people would stay back. The confrontation was balanced on the edge of a knife. Priscilla’s Aurors would fire curses if they thought their leader was in danger. “I’m also a Lord-level wizard, and I’ve finally decided to use that. You’ll have an awfully hard time fighting me, unless you really want to contact Falco Parkinson and ask him to try, or find Voldemort and wake him up.” Priscilla flinched at the mention of the Dark Lord’s name. Harry just barely kept from rolling his eyes. That might set the Aurors off. “Or invite another Lord or Lady into Britain, I suppose, but if one of them was willing to work as an assassin, others would become jumpy.”

“You can’t do this,” Priscilla breathed. “This is why I didn’t join your rebellion. You value life too little.”

Harry started to answer, but just then it happened.

One of the Aurors had edged around to the side. Harry had kept an eye on him, but hadn’t stopped talking to Priscilla. For one thing, that would have brought about open conflict if nothing else did. For another, the man had kept his wand in his robes, though one hand tucked down and close to it.

Now, he flung a vial of some kind of potion. Harry didn’t know who the target was. Perhaps it was meant to break apart on the rocks and splash all of them with the acid or poison inside.

What it did was smash against the karkadann’s leg as she pawed at the ground restlessly. Her fur promptly began to smoke, and an awful sizzling sound spread across the air. The karkadann screamed like a mountain falling, and then she brought down her head.

Harry had underestimated how fast she could maneuver with trees all around her—or perhaps he had only thought of charging, and not wielding her other weapons. The black corkscrew horn, four feet long, impaled the Auror, and Harry heard the smash and wrench and twist of bone as it pierced his spine. The karkadann reared, shaking the body so violently that Harry heard more bones snap, and bits of flesh tore loose and spotted the robes and cheeks of those who watched. Then she screamed again, and, half-turning, the corpse still caught on her horn, lashed out with one hind foot. Another two Aurors went flying. One came up limping; the other lay still, with what looked to Harry like a broken neck.

Then the Aurors began shouting and lifted their wands, and Harry knew the chaos that would explode in a moment. This was the first battle of the war, first blood shed. He had a moment to prevent heavier losses than there might otherwise be, and he took it.

His magic surged out of him and to the sides, spreading the heat shimmer further and faster. The Aurors it hit simply stopped moving,

like flies trapped in amber. That included Priscilla, who was caught in an awkward position with her neck half-twisted around. Harry kept pushing, and lifted them all into a hovering position, holding them above the trees.

Beside him, the karkadann shifted as if to move forward. Harry reached out his hand and put it on her leg. She snorted, and bowed her head. Blood had soaked the white fur of her face and dribbled around her gleaming black eyes in a grotesque mask. Harry held her gaze.

"No more," he told her.

She didn't have to obey, but she chose to. Indeed, a moment later, her eyes lifted to the Auror on her horn, and she snorted in contentment. Harry remembered legends that said karkadanns would carry the bodies of young elephants on their horns until the weight killed them, and repressed a shudder.

He turned to face the Aurors.

"The terms are the same as they have always been," he said shortly. "The Ministry has to show that it can treat werewolves with the same rights as humans. It has to do the same with all magical creatures, in fact. It has to show that it cares more about the people it's meant to serve than advancing its own agenda of pettiness and fear. I'm not going to listen to any arguments that call on me to keep the peace when its own Aurors aren't even capable of doing that in an ordinary arrest."

He flicked his hand, and the amber-air shifted, moving the Aurors out of the pine forest and towards the edge of the valley. When it had dropped them on the grass, Harry took a deep breath and reached out to Woodhouse.

Woodhouse was amused. The small tree with no leaves wished to expand the trees. It wished to hold the edge of the valley as safe as the center of the valley. Because every part of Woodhouse was the same as every other part, that was an easy request to grant. A touch, a surge, and every blade of grass and every stone and every speck

of dirt in that area was set to watch. Then the surge ran all around the hills, all around the place that recognized itself as Woodhouse, and they all came aware. The sky above it, which was its sky, would know when intruders tried to fly through it. There were ways that the small rushing things could try to appear inside it without going through the ground or the air, but Woodhouse watched them, too. It made the tunnels carved through nothingness solid, and the whirl of false air carried in objects impossible. All of this was very easy. Anything could have done as much. One part of it asked, and another part granted. And if the small rushing things that tried to hurt it did not come back, then so much the better. The valley could get on with its dreaming.

Harry rushed, gasping, out of the trance, and found Camellia beside him, along with Draco. Draco clasped his shoulder, and stared into his face, and never said a word. Camellia was more vocal.

“Did you raise the wards?” she demanded.

“Better than wards,” said Harry. His voice sounded strange, too deep. He shook his head and tried to adjust to having just a body, not stones and roots and soil. “Woodhouse is watching for us now. It would have allowed most people to enter it before. Now it will alert me when someone tries. We can let them Apparate in, or Portkey, but we don’t have to.”

“Wards, Wild,” said Camellia. “Just in case.”

Harry agreed. If nothing else, the wards would make the Aurors, or whoever arrived next, think of them as important, and they would waste time attacking them instead of trying to counter the place magic. He set to work weaving different kinds of shields around each other. He couldn’t use some kinds, because of Woodhouse’s magic interfering with them, but now that he was part of the valley, he knew instinctively which kinds would be hurtful and didn’t try to use them.

When the wards were set in place, and tightened and tautened from hill to hill like ropes, Harry bent over the karkadann’s leg. She snorted, as though to reassure him there was nothing to worry about, and tossed her horn, playing with the Auror’s body some more. Harry

examined the sides of the wound carefully. The potion had created a large pit and cauterized it in the same moment. He used Integro on it, but that only made the karkadann stamp. Harry listened carefully to her sounds, and looked into her eyes, for any sign of pain, and saw none. Of course, karkadanns were born for killing. It was entirely possible that she had magic which made the pain lessen, and was already healing the wound.

Only then did he turn to look at the bodies, and use his magic to pull the broken corpse from the karkadann's horn. She lunged after it for a moment, then lost interest and bowed her head to push playfully at his shoulder instead.

He had sent the wounded Auror out with the others. That left the impaled one and the one with the broken neck, who was definitely dead when Harry walked closer to him. He grimaced and shut his staring eyes, wishing his face wasn't on the wrong side of his body.

He felt guilt as a hollow behind the determination. He didn't have time to stop and give in to it. One of the dead Aurors had tossed a potion at the karkadann and started this. The other had got in the way. Yes, he wished it could have ended with no killing, but he had known it was not likely to. He could entertain no fantasies of walking out and offering himself up, because these attackers wanted the other people with him even more than they wanted him.

You knew what was happening when you began this.

He weighted both guilt and anger, and threw them into the Occlumency pools. Then he pushed the broken bodies out beyond the forest, for Priscilla and her people to claim, and turned to face the others. There were many more waiting behind the karkadann now: Hawthorn, who looked sorry to have missed the battle; Narcissa, with her wand in her hand and a cautious expression on her face; Evergreen, snarling; Remus, who looked away when Harry caught his eye; Adalrico Bulstrode, his face set and grim; Millicent, who nodded in response to a question Harry didn't know he'd asked.

Harry took a deep breath, and made himself into the leader that was needed.

“We’ve got a war coming,” he said. “Best we plan how to meet it.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Sunrise In the West

Falco sat down against the ruined wall and closed his eyes. A wind skittered through his hair, and he shivered. It had been a long time since he'd been so vulnerable to such mortal sensations.

But what he had learned in the ruins of the house at Godric's Hollow left him feeling more vulnerable than he had for a century.

It is begun, and will not be ended, until—when? Until one or both of them are dead? But he did not think he could see even that far ahead. His investigation of the past in that house had given him only pictures of possible futures, and since he could never have predicted the initial occurrence that had begun this, he did not think he could predict the one that was going to end it.

He only knew that it stretched across the wizarding world, a tangled skein of prophecy and hatred and death and magic, and it was confusing all his certainty. He wondered if even a necromancer could have seen the truth of Harry's death, if she looked at him right now.

One thing it had confirmed for him, though. Harry needed training. Harry needed guidance. He needed to know more about the realities behind Light and Dark magic, the means of fooling them and the means of wielding them. He did not need to be distracted by this minor rebellion of ideas that would flourish and die within a few years at most. His very life was hostage to something larger than he was, and until he solved that problem, his attention belonged there, not anywhere else.

Falco's immediate course was clear, and so it had been worth coming back to Godric's Hollow after all. He must crush this rebellion. But he could not do so by direct action. He would be unable to teach Harry anything if the boy thought of him as an enemy, and responsible for the failure of his childish ideals. So he would do it from behind the scenes, deft little touches the boy could assign to any of a dozen people.

It would begin with a dream. The ones he had conjured for Harry might be failing against the boy's mental defenses, but most wizards

had nothing like them. And there were many with a paranoid fear and hatred of werewolves at the moment, thanks to the Ministry's poisoned rhetoric.

A dream could fan that fear and hatred to burning flames.

Falco stepped into the paths of Light and Dark.

Indigena coughed, then blew air across the page she was studying. Part of the problem with reading a book as old as *Odi et Amo* was the musty smell; it had never quite disappeared even after Indigena performed three separate cleaning charms. The rose that curled about her wrist could shed a sweet scent, but it made her dizzy and dreaming if she sniffed it for too long.

She paused at the heading of a chapter named 'Brands and Scars' and tilted her head back. The thorns on her back slid out of their casings and twisted upright like the ears of some great beast. Indigena had already discovered they were sensitive to powerful magic, and, together with her own more normal senses, they helped her clarify what she was feeling.

A powerful wizard on the move. Falco Parkinson. Indigena grimaced. She hated that, for right now, there was so little she could do against him. Her wounded Lord needed her more, and the best plan to help him regain some dignity and pride involved long, slow research and Indigena sitting by his side every day so that she could whisper the words into his ear.

Then it would require months of working—though, if she had understood her Lord aright, he had begun that part already, with the only candidate he could find.

Indigena sighed again and consoled herself that this reading and research and whispering would eventually produce action. Not before next year, certainly, and not for months even then, but it would happen.

"May you destroy him, Harry," she murmured, and went back to reading.

“And what were the words that she spoke to you?”

Snape gritted his teeth. He did not want to say this. There were times he regretted ever giving in to Joseph. Awash in a sea of pain, and knowing there was more ahead if he swam deeper, his best instinct was to turn around and wade back to shore. Why should he care about healing? He had carried these wounds all his life long, and he could brew Dreamless Sleep to avoid the visions of his past. He could shut down that part of his mind and survive by going cold. He had done it before.

And during that time, he had made stupid mistakes that got him arrested by the Ministry, and very nearly destroyed Harry’s bond with him forever.

Remember why you are doing this, he told himself again, and raised his eyes to Joseph’s face. “That there were three truths in life,” he said. His tone was flat. “One was sorrow. The second was ugliness. The third was death.”

“And you believed her?” There was no contempt in Joseph’s voice, as Snape knew there would have been if he told this story of his mother’s truths to almost anyone else. There was only intense compassion, and he emphasized the word for the sake of making sure that Snape had really believed Eileen Prince.

“Yes.” If he half-closed his eyes, Snape could see the boy he had been, so anxious to grow up and learn these adult truths that his mother had promised not even all the men and women in the world knew. He had already known that he did not fit with other children. Too ugly, too tall, too smart—and, as the years passed and the “accidents” around the house happened with increasing frequency, too magical. By then, his mother had taught him about blood status, too. He was nine, and she had taken him out beyond the edge of town to watch a cat die.

“Why?”

“I saw them happen,” said Snape. The cat had been a young gray tom. Someone, someone Muggle, had staked its left hind leg to the

ground and wrapped barbed wire around it, so that the cat tore more and more flesh loose the more he struggled. "I saw sorrow." Someone had put a leg trap on the right front leg, and the cat had pulled nearly hard enough to sever the limb, but not enough to escape. "I saw ugliness." The cat's eyes were crazed and rolling, and the sounds that emerged from his mouth were sick, disgusting squalls of the kind to make Severus hate weakness. "I saw death." His mother had murmured the spell that would stop the cat's heart, but after they had watched for long enough that he understood she was not doing it out of compassion. She was doing it because some things did not deserve to live, and because the cat had taught him all it could. The cat's head had dropped, its body had sagged and puffed out, and then it was dead. Severus remembered watching it and not thinking of death as a release from pain. It was the end of everything, and the body it left behind the reminder of a life full of hurt.

"Snape?"

Snape blinked and shut his eyes, coming back from the half-life he had lived at that age, when everything was a daze, a haze, of grayness, and the only light he had was sharp and cutting, primed to reveal the most unfortunate truths of the world. "Yes?"

"Do you still believe that now?"

Snape sneered. "Of course not. I learned there were at least two realities my mother had forgotten to mention. One of them was hatred; she planned for me to live my life in unflinching truth, and not hate so things so much I would try to change them. And another was revenge. She thought I would never be in a position to take it."

"And now?" Joseph repeated insistently. "Since you asked for help with the healing? Since Harry became your son?"

Snape wondered how to answer, what to say. If he said that he did not believe those things any longer, he would tell Joseph what he wanted to hear, but he would sound weak. If he said that he believed them, Joseph would press further and further, and try to find out why.

Snape did not want to give him the truth—that he didn't know. Certainty, of any kind, was better than uncertainty.

"Severus?"

"Do not call me that," Snape snarled. "I did not give you permission to call me that."

"So you didn't." Joseph refused to look apologetic. "But it was the only name that got your attention. I called you a few times before, and you didn't answer." He paused. "Do you still believe that now?"

Snape took a deep breath, and reminded himself that this was Slytherin courage: the courage to look at the world as it really was, instead of believing in a false ideal and dying stupidly for it, as the Gryffindors would.

"I don't know," he whispered.

Joseph smiled, a smile that was like all of his expressions, water wearing away at a stone. "Good," he said. "That's the first step."

"Admitting weakness?" Snape fixed him with a flat stare, and imagined that Joseph was one of the fifth-year Gryffindors who lived to torment him this term; they appeared to have forgotten all basic Potions competency over the summer. He did not need, quite, to use the scowl that he would have used on Neville Longbottom, not for this. "This will make me stronger?"

"When you're standing on quicksand, it's best to know it, not pretend it isn't there," said Joseph.

Snape restrained the impulse to say that it was much better never to step on quicksand in the first place. He inclined his head.

"Now." Joseph sat up. "I'd like you to tell me what it was you saw which convinced you that these things she told you were truths of the world, instead of truths only in her own shredded imagination."

Snape began to recall every detail of the gray tom. Telling Joseph about grotesqueries was the one part of his healing he actually enjoyed. If he caused the Seer to turn green, or go a bit gray about the lips, then it was worth any amount of pouring memories into his ear.

Harry grimaced as he came out of a dream that felt oddly like a nightmare. He opened his eyes, and then stopped when he recognized what sat on his chest, one talon hooked into his pyjama top, staring at him with its beak an inch from his face.

The bird laughed at him. This time, it said nothing, only raked its talons viciously down the center of his chest. Harry ground his teeth together and succeeded in not screaming by sheer force of will; Draco was curled up in his arms, face resting only a few inches from the new, freezing wounds, and Harry didn't want to wake him.

The bird gave another chuckle, and then rose into the air, three-clawed wings working with a leathery sound that made the hair on the back of Harry's neck stand up. Then it vanished. A moment later, Draco stirred, and then sat up so violently that Harry's arm hurt as it fell off his back.

"What is that?" he asked, staring at the wounds.

"The bird again," said Harry softly, and looked down. The slashes were parallel, as they always were, and covered with frost, as they always were, dark red gobs of frozen blood glinting here and there like rubies. This time, at least, the scratches were not as deep or long as they had been in the Sanctuary. He shook his head and smiled at Draco, who didn't look reassured. "It didn't say anything to me this time, only marked me and left."

"Marked you," Draco whispered.

Harry studied him, but said nothing. Sometimes, Draco could have the most remarkable ideas, but only if no one interrupted him. Harry had seen him use it to solve Arithmancy equations before, sitting still with his eyes half-shut and then delving into the midst of an answer it would have taken them hours to reach any ordinary way.

But Draco blinked, then sighed and shook his head. "I still don't know what it means," he admitted, "any more than we did back at the Sanctuary." His hand wandered into Harry's hair, tugging at the strands now and then as if he couldn't help himself. "I know that I don't like it, and want it to stop happening."

"Me, too," Harry muttered.

Draco tugged at his hair again, not hard enough to hurt but enough to cause small beads of feeling to race down Harry's scalp, and then pulled his head back to kiss him. Harry opened his mouth. He didn't know if it was the shock of seeing the bird again, or the need to reassure himself that Draco was there and unwounded, at least, even if he wasn't, that made him shift, wrapping his arms around Draco. He only knew that suddenly he was more eager for a snog than he'd been in weeks, and his rib was healed enough for him to go through with this.

Draco rumbled, a sound that Harry might have described as a moan if his mouth was free when he made it, and then rolled slightly to his back, bringing Harry up to elbow and arm. Harry deepened the kiss, but refused to hurry it, even when Draco's rumbles seemed to urge him to do so. He slid his own hand into Draco's hair, and shifted so that most of his body covered Draco's own ribs. He didn't feel much, and wondered if he was supposed to, or if perhaps the feelings in that moment consisted of Draco's skin under his hand, warmer than he had expected from his pyjamas and the blankets, and the taste of his mouth, which was fuzzy but not that bad. Is one sign of romance when you don't think your partner has morning breath? Or perhaps I have no sense of smell right now.

Someone pounded on the bedroom door.

Harry just barely kept himself from jumping so that he bit into Draco's lip or smacked into his forehead or did something else embarrassing and hurtful. Gently, he pulled away and licked the small cut in his tongue Draco couldn't help making. Draco looked mortified. Harry smiled and slid out of bed. The bird's wounds had gone numb, and

otherwise he wore pyjama bottoms and top. There was no reason he wasn't fit to meet whatever message someone had brought now.

Except that, when he opened the door and saw Camellia's face, he had to lean a bit on the wall. Camellia must have been able to smell what they were doing, but she would make no mention of it.

"What is it?" he asked, and heard his voice flatten.

Camellia answered the same way. "Peregrine was leading her pack from their safe house to a place where they could Apparate out of sight of Muggles. Several young wizards attacked them." She let out a few quick breaths. "Twelve of them are dead. Peregrine's here, but wounded, and the two who defended her and arrived with her—they're afraid they won't survive."

"I'm coming," said Harry softly, and turned to look back at Draco, who was peering over the blankets. "Trouble," he said, and then he followed Camellia, leaving it up to Draco if he wanted to join in or not. Remus wondered if anyone outside the packs would be able to understand all the nuances of what was happening here.

In the center of the room they had chosen—a study, Woodhouse's largest, to accommodate as many people as possible—sat Peregrine, the small black leader of the pack that had run north of Loki's, and lived the closest to Muggles. She sat with her head lolling to the left, her back against a chair, her breathing shallow. A cut ran down her side, from collarbone to groin, shallow but long, and shedding drop after drop of blood. It shredded her shirt, and that she could not curl up enough to shield her throat and belly from attack said much about how vulnerable she was. Of course, the cut had been made with silver. Remus could smell the poison settling into her.

On either side of Peregrine curled the pack's other two survivors, a woman on the left, a man on the right. Both were almost naked. Both were covered with bruises, and stank of internal bleeding and organs shutting down. Both obviously did not care. They had kept up a constant chorus of snarls since appearing. Remus, if he squinted, could see the faint white cords that ran from their necks to

Peregrine's throat; he knew that, if any others of their pack had still been alive, those cords would have been as bright as stars to them. The two survivors were draining themselves of strength to give their alpha a chance to combat the silver's poison and survive. It was killing them. They did not care. Their snarls and their eyes and their bared teeth said that no one would touch Peregrine as long as they lived.

Hawthorn Parkinson crouched in front of them, about five feet away, coming no closer. She had one hand extended, though, and was talking constantly in a low, soft voice lost under the snarling. She seemed to be of the impression that Peregrine's packmates had to let her approach sooner or later. She did not know accepted werewolves, Remus thought. More was the pity.

Loki's pack—no, he must try to think of them as Harry's pack, he must—sprawled behind Hawthorn, in a loose half-circle. They knew that there was nothing they could do, other than pay these protectors the tribute of a good death-vigil. They had got their alpha out alive, in the middle of an attack that had to have been fierce; none of them had details yet, because the survivors had not spoken, and only knew the number of dead because they knew how many had been in Peregrine's pack. They would watch, and mourn their passing.

Then the door opened, and Harry stepped in.

Loki's pack lowered their heads at once, submitting in the presence of their alpha, watching him. Remus felt the impulse to do the same. He resisted it, half-rising to his feet instead. There were too many nuances here that Harry did not understand. Hawthorn at least had the instincts that came from carrying a wolf-web of her own, even though she did not know all the packs' customs, and could not. Harry had no sense of belonging to their world. What Loki had done in transferring the bond to him was not enough, especially when he refused the packmind that would have let him understand them all at the deepest level.

Harry turned towards the movement. So did Camellia. Remus wasn't sure if it was the frozen command in her eyes or the perfect lack of interest in Harry's that made him sit down again, and watch.

Harry stepped forward until he was level with Hawthorn. The guards' attention switched to him. Of course it would, Remus thought. Wizards had attacked them. They would smell the magic on him, without the counterbalancing smells of wild and wolf, and they would hate him.

Remus clenched his fists. Why did no one tell Harry these things?

Harry merely stood where he was, staring back at the two snarlers. Then he tilted his head back and began to sing.

The voice that emerged from his throat was no wolf's, but almost as pure—high and sweet and thrilling, a phoenix's. It was not louder than the snarls. It did not have to be. It swirled around them in complex, starry patterns. Remus could see flames darting around Harry's skin in faint outlines, as faint as the cords of Peregrine's pack, and it made him tremble and want to bow his head.

He continued watching, though, because he could not see what the song was meant to do, and if Harry moved forward now, he would get bitten.

The guardians trembled, and raised their voices. Harry went on singing. He didn't appear to take any notice of them; instead, he lost himself in his own voice. Remus heard a dirge there, the mourning song of sunset, as a great flame passed from the world and ceased to renew itself.

He shook his head sharply. This was a phoenix song. They were not phoenixes, whatever animals some packs might like to name themselves after. He did not think this would work.

Then he saw it was. The male werewolf trembled and laid his head on the floor, and ceased his weak snarl. The female kept on going, but she didn't lunge and snap when Harry stepped closer. Her eyelids fluttered, and her head dropped to the floor as well. A moment later, she was asleep.

The white cords binding them to Peregrine winked out of existence.

Harry was at Peregrine's side in the next moment, and Remus finally realized he carried a bottle of the white paste that they had smeared on Hawthorn's infected cut when they removed her from Tullianum. He set it to hover in the air beside him while he uncorked it and pulled out more and more, smoothing it over Peregrine's cut. Remus heard the pained undertone in her breathing ease.

Harry kept singing the while, though now it was a hum. It redefined the tension in the room, and made them seem more like comrades uniting against a common enemy. Remus saw other members of the pack relax from the corner of his eyes, felt the currents racing through the packmind soothe into a trouble-free sorrow.

A few moments later, and Peregrine was asleep to match her packmates. Harry stepped away from her and towards the sleeping werewolves.

He did—something. Remus wasn't sure what to call it. It seemed as if Harry unfolded a layer of himself, tucked it around his hand like cloth, and then held it out to the two survivors. One piece of the cloth wrapped the female werewolf, one the male. They both paused in their breathing, and Remus wondered if Harry had sent them on to the peace of death. They could at least die with a sense of accomplishment.

Then they breathed again more strongly, and the stink of their pain and dying eased, blowing slowly away like the remains of hunger when satisfied.

Remus blinked several times. He had known that Harry could absorb magic from artifacts and other wizards. He had not known, or he had forgotten if he had, that Harry could also give some of his own magic to others, and so restore those like these werewolves, who had given of their power to protect their alpha, to health.

Harry's face was pale when Remus looked at him, and his voice whispery when he finally ceased the song. "We need to have a council to discuss what happens next," he said. "Everyone who

wishes to be a part of it, please meet me in the kitchen in five minutes.” He glanced at Camellia. “Find a bed for them, first.”

And he swept out of the room, and left Remus to consider that his actions had been efficient, and kind in some ways—and perhaps he couldn’t have done that if he were caught up in the packmind, because he would have understood the sacrifice Peregrine’s wolves were making and would have let it go forward.

The world shifted a little more around, and inside, Remus as he thought about that.

Harry could almost smell the emotions racing around the room as his people crowded into the kitchen, though he wasn’t a werewolf. His song had eased some of their tension and anxiety, but only just. He could see it in their tightened jaws, feel it in the way their fingers tapped the table, hear it in the mutters that jumped from mouth to ear too quickly to become audible. He tilted his head to the side and called their attention with a simple flare of his magic.

“We don’t know who attacked them yet, do we?” he asked. He wasn’t sure how much information Camellia had got from Peregrine before the silver poisoning took her under. “Wizards” she had said, but perhaps there were names.

“No,” said Camellia. “It almost seems to have been a random attack—but they hit them as they left their safe house, so it couldn’t have been. Someone betrayed them, but I can’t imagine who.” She shook her head, a fast, helpless movement that slowed as she looked at him. Harry did his best to stand straight and project an air of confident pack alpha, because that was what was needed right now. “No member of the pack would have. And why would someone in the other packs? They have to know that the Ministry won’t grant them immunity from the hunting season, not with the way they turn on their heels and break their promises.”

Harry nodded. “And their location?”

“The street in front of their safe house,” said Camellia.

Harry nodded again. "Did they Apparate in?"

"Peregrine couldn't tell me that, Wild."

That meant that Harry couldn't just go to the street and start draining magic, the way he might have tried if the wizards were locals. It would have been a swift and fitting punishment for the attackers. This way, though, Harry had no idea if wizards even lived in the area, or if he would be draining the right ones if they did. It was too easy to Apparate in and then Apparate away again, out of reach. And he wasn't about to wake Peregrine up right now to ask.

"Very well," he said. "We'll watch the newspapers just in case they report the werewolf kills, though I don't think they will." His mind felt like a narrow tunnel made of light, and he turned to Moody, who stood almost across from him on the other side of the table, hands braced as if he would bring them down in a massive slap at any moment. "Alastor." Moody fixed both eyes on him. "I think now is the proper time to use that information you and your people took from Madam Bones's office."

Moody grinned, and his magical eye rolled, making him look half-crazed. "With pleasure, boy." He and his contacts had been the ones to break into Amelia Bones's office and paint her face like a clown's. The sheer humiliation of it—and a Body-Bind to prevent her from looking in the wrong direction at the wrong time—had meant that the Ministry people didn't suspect the real purpose of their raid. Moody had located certain records that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement wouldn't want spread about. Some had gone to his contacts, for blackmail material and as payment for their help. Moody had kept the rest. As he limped out of the room, Harry thought he was looking forward to using it.

"We're going to hit them through the newspapers?" asked Bavaros, Rose's mate, his voice a disapproving growl. As a werewolf, he was the biggest and blackest Harry had ever seen. "What kind of retaliation is that? Killing must be paid back in justice, Wild."

"And it will," said Harry. "As soon as we know who did this. I refuse to attack and kill a dozen wizards because a dozen werewolves were

killed. That's the kind of thing that won't make them sleep until they've eliminated us." He turned to Narcissa then. "You said that your sister might have some interesting things to offer us, Narcissa."

Narcissa nodded slowly. "And I think that she will help us without reservation now, as long as you will permit me to tell her the details of what happened today."

Harry inclined his head, and Narcissa hurried off. Harry faced the rest of them, and saw the narrow, intent expressions on their faces.

"This cannot go much further without shed blood," he said without preamble. "We saw that the day before yesterday, when the Aurors came. But I will fight a defensive war first, and that means that I will ask you to wait before attacking. Anyone who does will cause more fear, and will have to walk away from the Alliance of Sun and Shadow." He held the eyes of those few who seemed reluctant, like Bavaros, until they nodded their consent. Harry nodded once more. "Good. Now, I am going to make arrangements to keep the rest of the London packs safe."

His eyes went to Hawthorn. "Mrs. Parkinson," he said, "you are a hunted fugitive, but for the task I want you to do, speed is important, more than secrecy. Will you be willing to go to the London alphas in person and deliver a message?" He had not established the communication spell with most of the alphas, and many of them refused to receive owls from wizards—or from the alpha who had taken Loki's place, since some had had rivalries with him. A lone werewolf, not part of an accepted pack, stood more of a chance of being taken seriously.

"Gladly," said Hawthorn, her eyes full of life. The silver-infected cut on her shoulder had almost healed, Harry saw. "Give me a list of names and Apparition locations, and I will leave."

"Good," said Harry. "For the rest of you, defense is the most important thing we can concentrate on right now. If you are a wizard, I want you to practice dueling until you drop. If you're a werewolf born Muggle, you are now on permanent patrol of the valley, in alternating shifts. Camellia, you're in charge of arranging those. The Aurors

know where we are. I expect another attack before long, from either them or the Unspeakables.”

“And what will you be doing?” Bavaros asked. There was less venom in his voice than before, but he still sounded frustrated.

“Working on things to make them leave us alone, of course,” Harry replied, and then turned away. He needed to find the list of names and Apparition locations for Hawthorn, and then a relatively isolated part of Woodhouse to make the statement he wanted to make. And, before that, he wanted to drain some of the Black artifacts that he had brought along. Giving his own magic to make sure that the werewolves with Peregrine didn’t die had tired him, as had the phoenix song. He would need to rest.

An arm curled around his shoulder halfway down the hall. Harry turned, blinking, and met Draco’s eyes. Draco looked as if he were made of fire, given how bright his gaze was.

“We’re going to show them,” he breathed. “Going to show them all, aren’t we, Harry?” And he leaned forward and kissed him hard enough to hurt. Harry didn’t care. He kissed back, single-mindedly. His mind was no longer a narrow corridor filled with light, but a galloping horse, speeding towards its destination.

“I hope so,” he said.

Hawthorn appeared in the first Apparition location, on a Muggle street which shocked her with the brightness of its colors and its stink. Even without her current nose, she thought, the reek would have overwhelmed her; with her werewolf sense of smell, she almost fainted. She plugged up her nostrils and plunged across the street in quick steps, with only a glance to make sure no Muggle cars were approaching. Rubbish and petrol and dirt and other things she couldn’t identify—they blared and yammered at her, and she would have given a great deal to be able to ignore them.

She reached a door in the house she’d been told to look for, and knocked impatiently. The house was a rather typical Muggle one, small and square and looking like its neighbors on either side. But a woman who smelled like snow and pine needles opened the door,

and if she didn't have amber eyes, she was probably wearing green lenses, or green magic, to cover them.

"Welcome, sister," she said, when she saw Hawthorn. "What's the matter?"

Hawthorn told her in brief words about the attack, and the woman's mouth tightened as she listened. Then she nodded, and said, "I'll warn the others of my pack. But we'll want to know a few more details. Will you come in?"

Hawthorn was more than willing to step into the house. It did not look so drab inside, where the walls were bright with fairly good amateur paintings and strips of colored paper arranged in collages. She understood the reason for the latter when laughter rang down the entrance hall and two children chased each other into view, both wrestling on the floor. One had amber eyes, and easily pinned the other, who didn't and began to cry about it not being fair.

The woman she'd met at the door pulled the amber-eyed child off the other one and tossed him into the air. He squealed on the way down. The woman and the boy lying sprawled on the floor both laughed.

Hawthorn was the one who heard the cracks as Apparating wizards arrived, perhaps because she was so used to listening for it, perhaps because she had been half-expecting it since she heard about the attack on Peregrine.

She flicked her wand, and powerful wards surrounded the house. They wouldn't hold against a steady barrage of spells, but they were strong enough to deflect the first, which would have torn apart the lungs of the woman standing beside her if it had come through the window. In a moment, the children's laughter changed to shrieks, tinted with a howl in the case of the amber-eyed boy.

"Get them to safety!" Hawthorn snapped at the woman, whom she knew was a Muggle. She scurried to obey, thankfully, with no muttering about rank. The pack's wizards were already appearing, stumbling sometimes, caught up in their own pyjamas, frizzes of hair standing out from their heads, but with wands gripped in their hands.

Hawthorn fell to one knee as a Crucio came through her wards. It missed her, but caught another of the wizards, who dropped, writhing and screaming. The other closest one bent to tend to him.

She was a fugitive anyway, she told herself. And someone willing to use Cruciatus was an enemy who needed to be stopped.

She stood, and leaned out the window. She could see the witch she thought had fired the Crucio, golden-haired and yellow-eyed and disdainful. She was a daughter of some Light pureblood family or another, which didn't make what she'd done any better, but made Hawthorn all the more eager to fell her. Too many of the Aurors who had hurt her in Tullianum had had yellow eyes.

She spoke the words clearly, and felt the thunder of the magic pass up her wand. "Avada Kedavra."

The beam of green light went through the wards, of course; no barrier could stop the Killing Curse. The witch turned her back just before it hit, and fell sprawled on the lawn of the Muggle house next door. Hawthorn laughed, and heard it come out as a bark and then a howl.

She didn't know what her chances were of getting vengeance on the Aurors who had hurt her. There were so many of them, and Harry's obsession was justice.

But these were wizards trying to destroy a pack that had never done them harm, out of intense paranoia and fear. They were perfect targets to soothe some of the hatred in her soul. And she did not even need to worry about concealing her activities from the Muggles all around them. The Ministry was the one who must send in its Obliviators. Hawthorn was a revolutionary, and a fugitive, and beyond all their standards.

At peace in a way she hadn't been since her Death Eater days, she chose her next target.

"Andromeda." The voice was gentle, and wistful, and tinged with just a hint of an accent; unlike most of his family, Jean Delacour had learned to speak English at a very young age, when their parents had

thought he and Andromeda would make a good match. That had soon ended, when the Delacour family made an alliance with the Veela Council instead, but they had known each other by then, and visited summers, and remained friends.

And, Andromeda knew as she stepped out of the Floo and let Jean brush the soot gently from her robes and kiss the tips of her fingers, a little bit in love with each other, at least on his side.

“Jean.” She dipped her chin and switched to French; her mother had not been remiss in insisting that her daughter learn her betrothed’s language as well. “I come to beg you to do a favor for an old, withered woman past the prime of her beauty.”

“There shall be no ending of the prime, my dear one.” Jean escorted her to a seat in front of the large table he used as a desk in his study, never letting his hand enfold more than her fingernails. It was courtesy that his wife insisted upon. Andromeda was just grateful, at that moment, that she had understood that they were friends, and permitted Andromeda to continue to visit at all. “What brings the fairest of the Blacks to me? Speak, and it shall be set in motion when the words are ended.”

Andromeda sat, ruffling her robes out around her. She had no fair beauty to show off like Narcissa did, but dark hair and eyes set off by pale skin and dark green robes had always done the trick for Jean; they were doing it now, she saw, from the way his glance followed her. “A favor for a mother fond of her daughter,” she said, with a little sigh. “A daughter who has run off to join rebels and werewolves and turn against the Ministry, but whom her mother cannot help loving anyway.”

She saw Jean lift his head as if scenting a wind, and hid her smile in a simpering frown. He would have heard of this already, of course. The French Ministry of Magic might not have that much interest in making the British Ministry look bad, at the moment—the French Minister certainly didn’t want Voldemort turning his sights across the Channel—but the French purebloods were a different matter. They were so carefully caught up in their own intricate dance of Light and

Dark that a Lord-level wizard who could balance between both was of intense interest to them. Add in the Veela Council with their interest in the vates, and the fact that Beauxbatons had received an influx of students from Hogwarts this year talking about the Midsummer battle, and there were plenty of French wizards and witches who believed that Harry should be given all the help that his government could give him, not hindered. He should be breaking webs and defeating Voldemort, not forced to hide in a valley because the Minister was an incompetent idiot who couldn't control his own Department Heads.

"That is a rather large favor," Jean said, sitting back and watching her without blinking now. Andromeda had never known anyone who could go as long without blinking as he could. Perhaps he had taken lessons from cats, or his wife.

"It is a rather large love," said Andromeda, and drew out a lace handkerchief to hide a sniffle in.

Jean let out a long-suffering sigh. "My dear one," he said. "What am I to do with you?"

"I have already told you that," she replied, letting a bit of the sting through. She had never favored men who pretended that they were stupid. Genuinely stupid ones could be entertaining. But Andromeda had chosen her own Ted for intelligence, and if she had ended up marrying Jean after all, she would have insisted that he drop this act at once, especially around her. She suspected its continuation was his wife's fault.

Jean inclined his head. "You have hinted at it, my dear. But there are so many things I could do to help you. What shall it be? Easing the pressure on the rebellion? Distracting this vates's enemies? Contacting allies for him?"

"All those and more," said Andromeda, leaning forward. "As well as the demiguise hair that I know you have on hand." She savored his astonished look, but met it with a sad one of her own, and a headshake. "I know, Jean," she said. "I always know. When I realized that someone was buying up all the demiguise hair at the same time as the protests against its use began, I realized who that must be.

You should make the names of your operations a bit less transparent to someone who knows your history. As well as your false protest groups.”

Jean inclined his head. “You cannot expect me to give him one of the most important Wolfsbane ingredients for free, I hope?”

“Of course not,” said Andromeda. “Charge him a fair price. And in return, send a few Veela to him to see how they are treated. I promise you, there is no one who will better protect them and insure their future.” She had to admit that, even though she had been reluctant to get close to the boy when she saw how much he depended on Narcissa. She still would not willingly enter his valley and consort with her sister. But her daughter had made her choice, and that took away the option of standing aside and pretending nothing was happening.

“He is still in the midst of a British rebellion,” Jean mused. “And you think he would welcome French ties?”

“He knows the rest of the world exists, but it has not yet reached out to him,” said Andromeda, and again calculated her voice to sting. “Is that his fault, or the fault of wizards and witches who do not want the Dark Lord to notice them?”

Jean simply nodded, not having the grace to look ashamed. He would have been one of those who counseled his friends among the pureblood wizards and allies in the Veela Council to remain neutral, Andromeda knew. Jean was primarily a builder; he extended his business practices quickly on the surface, but in reality after years of planning, and he used allies and cats-paws for most of his more daring political moves. He was more interested in creating security for those who would follow him than in grabbing at glory and watching it fade. He was the opposite of her sister’s husband in that way. “Then I have a few cousins I may send him. Tell me, is young Millicent Bulstrode in the valley with him?”

Andromeda could not hide her astonishment this time, and he laughed at her.

"We have ties that you do not yet suspect," he said. "We have reached out to this vates in our own way. Now is merely the hour to make ourselves known to him." He grasped and kissed her hand. "Go back to England, my dear. You shall have your distractions, and your allies. The release of pressure will take longer, but there are favors and those who owe me favors. Your daughter will be safe, and ourvates." His teeth flashed as he smiled. "If Britain does not want him, we might as well show him how courteous France can be."

Harry started to shut the door of the tiny contemplation room behind him, and then frowned as Draco ducked around it before he could. "You're sure?" he asked.

Draco simply nodded. He knew what Harry was planning, and he wanted to be close. Harry seemed to think he would find the sensations too overwhelming. Draco didn't believe so.

Besides, he wanted something to make up for the interrupted kiss that morning.

Harry eyed him, then shrugged and closed his eyes. For a few moments more, he breathed, and his magic, restored to normal strength after the draining of a few Black artifacts, drew in around him. Draco leaned against a wall and waited. This room was entirely made of wood, of course, and had no loose furniture, as was appropriate for a place where one was supposed to sit on the floor. That meant there would be nothing to fall into when Harry made his statement.

Harry opened his eyes and let his magic rise.

It started as the smell of roses, but it added so many more folds to itself in seconds that Draco could not think of it only that way. The air split open, and glittering diamond-edged blades of sunlight came forth. They rolled around Draco, flashing and spinning, and the illusion of a great cat bounded through them, silver-clawed and dark-furred. Draco was sure it was a lynx.

The taste of Chocolate Frogs filled his mouth, and the low hum of phoenix song his ears. Then there came a warm pressure on his skin. It was like the warmth Harry had called to face the Aurors in the pine wood the day before yesterday, but this didn't dry out his skin. It

pressed close, soft and delicious, and he realized with a start that Harry had drawn inspiration for it from the heat shared beneath their blankets this morning.

He managed to look at Harry through all that, and, fascinating as the magic was, this was more than worth it. Harry's eyes were closed, but his hair shifted around him, and the light and the lynx began with him and extended from him, and the music and the smell of roses and the warmth belonged with him in ways Draco couldn't articulate. He had changed out of his pyjamas into normal robes and tended to the cuts on his chest, and he looked calm and confident and stubborn.

Of course he did, Draco thought. He wasn't doing anything all that extraordinary. Everything he did was an extension of things he had done before. This was only a message appended on to the end of a longer one, which the British public as a whole had been too stubborn to read.

The magic swirled, and rose. And it expanded up to the roof of Woodhouse, and then higher, and then higher.

Draco swore he could feel it pass through the edges of the place magic and the valley's wards, pacing upwards, shimmering as it did so, a second sunrise in the west. It continued flowing, continued rolling, sweetness on all levels. There was nothing frightening about it, unless you were one of Harry's enemies and hadn't realized the sheer strength that was his to command.

It unrolled, and it kept on unrolling. Draco felt the overwhelming urge to close his eyes.

He did, and now he could hear the phoenix song more clearly than ever. The song took him down into itself and showed him the truth in the midst of the fire.

Harry did not promise death to his enemies. He promised resistance, and the resistance would go on growing until his goals were accomplished and his enemies' fears dead. He would have rights for werewolves and freedom from webs for other magical creatures, reworking of Ministry laws and a change in the balance of things, and

anything else he wanted. Blood would not stop him. Death would not stop him. Nothing would stop him.

It was a rational, calm, determined “Fuck you” to the rest of the wizarding world. Harry asked them to view his magic as hope and freedom if they could, but he was not overly worried about what would happen if they did not, because he was also asking them to view it as power. And it was a message of change, above all.

Draco basked in all the mingled sweetness, the greatest extent to which Harry had ever let his wings unfurl, and squinted through the maze of light at Harry. So strong, so stubborn, so beautiful. And he’s mine.

That thought inspired an emotion too possessive to be called lust. Draco stepped forward and curled his arms around Harry, dragging him against his chest. Harry stepped backward in the same moment, tilting his head so that he could kiss Draco at a less awkward angle than would otherwise have been required.

Draco cradled Harry’s face and let the dawn take him away. Rufus closed his eyes.

Yesterday had come the shine of Harry’s magic, and immediate reactions of panic and fear and wonder, and the first open attacks on werewolf packs, most of which had resulted in the packs escaping with few losses and fleeing deeper into hiding. Rufus had had to listen to people bragging about relatives who had managed to kill werewolves, or congratulations for those who had. They were dealing with the “monstrous menace” that threatened to overtake Britain.

Three days ago, Priscilla had returned empty-handed, with the news that Rufus’s last hope for peace, the appeal to Harry for the greater good and greater number of lives in Britain, had failed. Not only had it failed, it had resulted in two dead Aurors. The others were baying for Harry’s blood and the blood of his karkadann—a karkadann, of all creatures—now. And she had told Rufus, in confidence, about how disgustingly at least one werewolf prisoner had been treated. Rufus

knew the name of that werewolf prisoner. She was one of Harry's closest allies, just to make things better.

Today brought headlines blazing across the papers. The Quibbler carried photographs of the dead werewolves that they'd obtained Merlin knew how, the bodies obviously unmarked in the way that meant the use of the Killing Curse, and asked loudly whether the Ministry had granted permission to use the Unforgivables along with their hunting season. The Vox Populi trumpeted support for Harry from every page, and demanded to know how the Minister felt concerning the deaths of his people and the retreat of the "real heroes" into one valley in Wales.

The Daily Prophet, and his own Floo connections, carried the worst news.

Rufus opened his eyes and read the headline again.

NEPOTISM IN THE MINISTRY:

Amelia Bones's Niece, Other Relatives of Ministry Officials
Committed Crimes

By: Rita Skeeter

The article contained extremely sensitive information concerning the arrests of various Ministry officials' children, siblings, parents, and other family members, for everything from fraudulent sale of protective charms to use of the Imperius Curse. All that information had been contained in files in Amelia's office; it could not be destroyed thanks to the fact that the arresting Aurors would be alerted by ward-alarm if that happened, but it could be hidden and hushed up and forgotten about. And it had been. No one was supposed to know it was there, and since the purpose of invading Amelia's office had seemed to be to mock her and paint her face like a clown's, no one had checked on the files.

Someone had stolen them, and then given the knowledge to the Daily Prophet.

Rufus knew what it would mean. Embarrassment, of course, but also demands for full-scale investigations into the Ministry, re-arrest of some of the worst offenders, and resignation of those who had done the most contortions to protect a loved one.

And then, this morning, he had received a firecall from one of his agents in the French Ministry, to warn him that the pureblood community in France was stirring like a beehive, and all the action was Harry-oriented. Spain would not be long in following suit. Rufus had barely finished speaking to that agent when another contacted him from the Portuguese Ministry. Minister Faria Santa Rita was preparing to issue a declaration condemning the British Ministry's actions against the vates, the agent had said; obviously the British Minister could not see that the war against You-Know-Who was more important to every country of Europe than the war against werewolves.

Rufus's Ministry was shaking to pieces around his ears.

It seemed that they were to have an earthquake, and a revolution, whether or not they wanted one.

Rufus considered the photograph that Skeeter had chosen to illustrate her story. It showed a scurrying Amelia Bones trying to get out of sight before the camera could capture her; each time she passed across the picture, she wrapped a fold of her robes around her head. It made her look remarkably guilty, which of course was part of Skeeter's point.

Rufus didn't feel far different, himself.

Intermission: A Leap Into Burning Light

Snape crouched, his eyes lowered, and listened to the sharp shrieks and cracks ringing through the room. Most of the time, the Dark Lord used magic to torture his prisoners, or at least magic channeled through physical objects. It wasn't often that he had a taste for the more mundane forms of punishment.

Now, though, he was having Lucius whip the Muggle mother of a Mudblood girl who had already died, her ribs piercing her lungs after uncounted rounds of Cruciatus. Lucius did it as perfectly as he managed every other type of torture. He moved around the woman, managing to make the whip come from an unanticipated direction every time, making her start and flinch and moan and beg for mercy long after she should have known she would receive none. The rest of the Death Eaters knelt on the stone floor of the torture room, in a loose half-circle, while the Dark Lord sat beyond Lucius, on the chair of black stone that he had used the first time Snape met him in the catacombs. Nagini coiled at his feet as usual, and hissed in time with the screams.

Bellatrix Black Lestrange watched with her mouth open, but Snape didn't think many of the others were any more enthralled than he was. Regulus would certainly have yawned and made some sarcastic remark if he dared. Others trembled on the urge of whispering to a neighbor. But their boredom was real. They simply didn't take the enjoyment out of this that the Dark Lord did, or they didn't see the symbolic value of leaving a whipped and broken corpse among the others.

Snape knew that none of them carried the brewing cauldron of hatred, disgust, contempt, and self-contempt in their chests that he did.

And none of them had made the decision he had made—or almost had. He had attended the torture session tonight, even though Voldemort would have exempted him from it to brew a potion if Snape had asked, because he wanted to be sure. Did he really feel nothing as the whip fell again and again? Could he take no pleasure in the thought of doing the same to his own enemies, if the Death Eaters actually managed to capture James Potter and his wife and not let

them escape time after time, or if the seduction of Sirius Black worked?

No. He could not. What he preferred was so much more real, the black bones of the world that his mother had always whispered to him were there. It did not cloak itself in symbols. It had no need for black robes and white masks. It did not tire, as the Dark Lord did, of the torture and order an execution too soon.

If he had one of his enemies at his mercy, he would not make mild work of them, and he would not make confusing gestures to show them his hatred. He would tell them of his hatred, and then he would cause them such pain that they could not be in doubt of it.

Of course, he had thought that a short while ago, and he had taken too much time killing the witch he had thought killed Regulus.

He no longer had the clear path running before him, the certainty that he knew the truths of the world even if no one else around him did. Nor did he have the acceptance he used to have, that he could do as others demanded of him, as his Lord demanded of him, and not be touched or broken by it.

Regulus had come into the darkness and was not the less himself. Snape could not say the same.

He wished for a challenge that would make him himself again. He wished for a path that would carry him, not out of the darkness, but through a tunnel placed in the darkness, a narrow beam he would walk upon or perish by falling from. He did not aspire to forgiveness. How could anyone but despise him, when he despised himself?

Except Regulus—but that was a confusing subject and not one he was ready to touch.

Snape wanted to tuck the confusion away, and know what he was. And there was only one man who might be able to tell him. It was not easy. It involved two months of dancing attendance on the Dark Lord just a bit too closely, so that he seemed anxious to curry a favor that had never faltered, jealous of a standing Voldemort had

always granted him. Of course, he also had to avoid annoying his Lord so severely that he would be tortured or actually demoted. And he had to keep up his brewing and his attention to the politics of the Death Eaters in the meanwhile.

Snape did not mind. It was good practice for the status he expected to have when he returned from Dumbledore's office. He would be a spy, and he must then keep himself in check at all times, or he would die. He focused the attention on himself, and with every small success he won, making the Dark Lord think a certain thing even when he was armed with the most piercing Legilimency Snape had ever met, he despised himself a bit less. Oh, the sea of contempt and self-loathing was still there and always would be, but he could build a bridge across the surface again.

And at last it worked. The Dark Lord grew just exasperated enough with him to want him at a distance, but not so irritated with him that he considered Snape a bad servant. He gave Snape the mission on a night when most of the other Death Eaters were out tracking down Aurors and turning their ambushes on them. Snape knelt at the foot of the throne and allowed neither his body nor the surface of his thoughts to give him away.

"You are to discover the general location of both the Potters and the Longbottoms," Voldemort told Snape. "Rumor is that both Alice Longbottom and Lily Potter are set to deliver at the end of July, but they have retreated into hiding. Find them, my faithful servant. You know why." Snape was the one who had overheard the prophecy that claimed the one with the power to destroy the Dark Lord would be born as the seventh month died. He thought of it as a bit of stuff and nonsense himself, but bringing back that information—even if it was only a few lines of a more complete prophecy he had not had the time to overhear—had secured his position at his Lord's side.

"Who is my partner to be, my Lord?" Snape laced his voice with just a bit of an ingratiating whine, as if he could not stand to be gone from his Lord's side for that long without someone else to get one up on. It worked.

“No partner, Severus,” said Voldemort, and stroked Nagini with one hand, hissing something soothing to her as she lashed her head back and forth. Snape and Nagini had never got on. “You will do this alone.”

Perfect.

“As my Lord commands.”

Snape felt the pulse of wards as he arrived at the school. He was not surprised. Dumbledore had raised wards that would alert him to the presence of anyone on Hogwarts grounds with a Dark Mark, after a surprise attack that had nearly killed several of the Mudblood children venturing to Hogsmeade.

He continued walking, but he bowed his head, and he limped. He had broken his own leg with a potion in his body to help him endure the pain, and then healed it again, clumsily. It would make him look as though he had taken a beating. That was what he wanted. He knew that Dumbledore would be much less inclined to accept him as truly repentant if he seemed to have planned this. It had to be an impulsive, spur-of-the-moment change of heart. That was what the Headmaster loved in his Gryffindors. That was the weakness that Snape would play to. He would make the Headmaster think he was volunteering to be a spy because his conscience was actually troubling him.

No one needed to know that it was justifications he had trouble coming up with any more, not reasons to keep torturing and killing.

“Stand where you are.”

It was McGonagall who stopped him, of course. Snape would have expected nothing less. He halted, huddling under his cloak, and then slowly lifted his head. He had also used a potion that would leave bruises on his face. He heard her swallow, but she kept her wand steady on him nonetheless as she called for Albus to come out and join her on the grounds.

The Headmaster came. With him came light. He had taken to freeing his magic more and more often since his open battles with Voldemort, and it hung around him in a glimmering white aura.

There is power here, Snape thought. That comforted him. It made it seem more likely, that he would think he could shelter under Dumbledore's protection. No one sane would leave Voldemort's side if he didn't have a sanctuary to run to, another Lord to protect him.

He went to his knees as though the light had overcome him, and began to sob like a child. Another potion insured that the tears came easy. Both the Headmaster and McGonagall had known him as a student, and knew how hard it was for him to weep. It was not something Snape had done easily or willingly even after the attack by the precious golden boys of Gryffindor, the Marauders.

He heard Minerva swallow again. Then she whispered, "Severus?"

"Severus," Albus echoed, and his voice was sterner. "Why have you come?"

Snape shook his head, letting the tears take his voice, and held up his left arm, shaking the sleeve back from it. He instantly had two wands pointed at him, but that didn't matter. They would see the knife slashes around the Dark Mark, as though he had tried to cut it free from his flesh.

They would take him into their arms and their hearts. They would accept his tale of repentance and believe it, because they could not imagine why someone would join the Dark Lord in truth, unless they were mad or power-crazed. Hatred of the depth to which Snape bore it was beyond their ken.

They would never know that it was a mixture of Regulus and self-contempt and contempt for the other Death Eaters and Regulus again that had driven him here. They would demand sacrifices of him. No one could take the Dark Mark unless they were willing, and so the Order of the Phoenix had no way to obtain a spy in Voldemort's camp unless a loyal Death Eater turned to them. The few who had changed their minds so far had simply fled. Snape could change that. They

would demand that he do so. Dumbledore would say, with a sharp twinkle in his eyes, that it was the only way Snape could show he was truly sorry for his crimes.

Snape would let them believe he was reluctant. He would use the danger to learn himself again and steady his soul against the pounding waves of confusion. They would never think to look for that, because they would not believe that was important enough for someone to risk his life and his body.

Dumbledore would look for his motives, but Snape had hidden his motives from Voldemort, who was the better Legilimens. He would fail. He would think Snape was sincere, not least because of the tears and the show of weakness.

He would not realize that one could show a lesser weakness to protect a greater, and most especially to cure the greater.

That was another thing Snape's mother had taught him.

On the night he changed his life to change his soul, his cheeks were wet with tears, but the innards of his mind were dry.

Chapter Thirty: A War Within Their Hearts and Minds

“Come in, Severus.”

She had known it would come to this someday, Minerva told herself as she watched Severus stride into her office and sit down in the chair in front of her desk. Yes, other parents might have been able to refrain from following their children into battle, but most of those parents didn't teach in Hogwarts, and none of their children were engaged in raising rebellion against the Ministry. And none of the parents were Severus, and none of the children were Harry.

In the moments before Severus began to speak, Minerva had time to study his eyes, and know she was losing him. Perhaps she had lost him long ago. His first loyalty had never been to the school. It had been to Albus at one point, the man who had rescued him from the darkness and given him a life worth living. Then it had been to Harry, and it had stayed that way even through arrests and battles and losses.

Best to accept that she would always have had a temporary Potions Professor and Deputy Headmaster in him, rather than a permanent one.

“You will need to hire Slughorn to fulfill the Potions position, Minerva,” he said, his voice astonishingly composed. “I fear that I can no longer give you my best service. He has years of experience. He will also make a good Head of Slytherin House. He understands those who do not have problems that consume the whole world.” And Severus smiled, faintly, the first time Minerva had seen him do so since the term began. “I have not understood them in some time.”

Minerva nodded, a deep stickiness in her throat that prevented her from speaking for long moments. It felt like the Sugar Quills she no longer ate for this very reason. “You are going to join Harry?”

“I did not say that.”

And she saw the deep lines carved around his mouth, and the wariness in his eyes, and realized that he did not know, even now, if she might turn him over to the Ministry if he admitted his destination.

Impulse made her lean across the desk between them and put her hand on his arm. Severus tried to sit back, or sit up, and reach for his wand. Minerva maintained her grip, staring into his eyes. It was rare that anyone who knew he was a Legilimens did that, and it gave him enough pause for Minerva to have her say.

"I am on Hogwarts's side in this battle," she said. "The side of Hogwarts is not the side of the Ministry. You are one of my students, and so is Harry. I would never betray either of you to the Aurors, Severus."

"You may not have a choice." His mouth was tight, his eyes shadowed, and still he looked better than he had on most days he taught Potions. "Not if the Unspeakables, who are also his enemies, come. They will take the information from you before you know what they are doing. They will insure that you can tell no one else about it, and that you do not even remember their visit."

"They cannot corrupt Godric, or the other Founders," said Minerva. "Godric assured me of this. The anchor-stones are older than the vast majority of the Unspeakables' artifacts. Do not worry about me, Severus. I have my own defenses. Leave me to guard your back, and go to your son."

He stared at her, and Minerva tilted her head up, letting his sight flare into her mind and soul. He would read everything there. He would read the determination to protect Hogwarts and her children; he would read the difference between what she wanted to do and what she could do; he would read how she had resolved that particular battle, by making herself into a protective Gryffindor lion and insuring that no one would be able to use her or her inner knowledge of Harry as a political weapon.

He lowered his head, and blinked. Minerva waited. It was by far the deepest Legilimency she had ever suffered from Severus, and it

made her head hurt. But if it reassured him, then it was worth it, it was all worth it.

And then Severus said, "I never understood you," and it made her want to cry, and her throat burn fiercely that she could not, after all, go with him.

"No, you didn't," she said quietly.

He said nothing more, and he didn't apologize. He stood and walked out of the office, with nothing more than a quick head-bob.

Minerva sat back and closed her eyes. She felt a hand on her shoulder: Helga, deepest and quietest of the Founders, coming to soothe her in this moment. That she could not do anything else didn't help, because she had acted in accordance with responsibility and duty.

But if she had been able to act solely for herself, then she would rather have followed Harry to battle. Gryffindors might be born to protect, but they were also born to go to war.

The choice she had made did not invalidate that part of herself, and never would.
Her head hurt.

Priscilla drank a headache potion, choking at the taste. She had never liked it, but she had never liked the way that her headaches tended to linger for hours unless she drank one, either. It was rare that she had headaches any more, and even rarer the ones like this one, bristling across her forehead like bones shifting beneath the skin.

She set aside the vial when she was done, and leaned back in the chair, and closed her eyes. The dragonhide pushed against her neck, smooth and soft and comforting. That didn't ease the feeling that the rest of her body was a wishbone tugged on by two impatient children.

She owed allegiances in both directions in this damn war, and she had no idea what to do.

Priscilla had hoped that matters would resolve when she went to Harry, which had been the reason that she had agreed instantly when Rufus offered the mission to her. If she could just persuade him out of starting a war, then her course would be clear. The rebellion would collapse without him. Thomas would come home. He might have to spend some time in Tullianum, but Priscilla was confident she could win him free. Harry was the one they all wanted, the prominent criminal. No one would care about a man who fired a few curses at Aurors to give them six legs, next to that.

And she would have answered her own honor, which had driven her to join the Aurors in the first place. It was not right that some people might get better treatment than others, that passions might rule over reason. If a murderer was killed because the Aurors let a member of the murder victim's family into the criminal's cell—while the criminal was chained and had no wand—then that was not justice. Priscilla disliked rage. She distrusted fanatics. She preferred the rules that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement used, because they were at least rules and they said that someone arrested for a particularly bad prank and someone arrested for being a Death Eater both still had the right to breathe without pain, to eat, to drink, and to stay distant from vengeance-obsessed relatives.

Before Harry had sent the Dementors away, the Aurors had had holding cells in the Ministry for those criminals who hadn't been sentenced yet, or who were to serve lesser punishments than going to Azkaban. Priscilla had preferred that. The cells were either in the Department itself or scattered on other floors. It was possible to know in an instant, or have someone see it, if a prisoner was being mistreated. It wasn't possible in Azkaban, of course, with how rarely inspections came there, but at least in Azkaban one knew the prisoners had already been tried and sentenced, and they had been handled humanely before then.

And then had come Tullianum, with holding of sentenced criminals and criminals awaiting trial all in one place. More to the point, it was near the Department of Mysteries, and far away from the rest of the Ministry.

Inspections were rare now, and abuse was easier to hide.

Priscilla was disgusted and sickened to realize just how easy.

The Aurors were not what they had been, not if fear could push them to hurt werewolves that way. Priscilla had assumed that most of her people believed about werewolves what she did: they were monsters three times a month, and there were laws against them that one might feel one way or the other about, but a werewolf in custody was the same as any other prisoner. It wasn't up to Aurors to change the laws. It was up to them to enforce them, and to act with honor.

And now she found out that wasn't true.

She could not remain where she was.

On the other hand, she could not go to Harry. He had enacted no neutral standard, either. He would kill those who opposed him. Priscilla believed him when he said that he was willing to do anything to secure political freedom for werewolves and other magical creatures, whether he said that by word or by magic. That meant no limitations. That might mean a code of honor for prisoners and the like, but she had no way of telling that. And what would happen if he caught the people who had attacked the werewolf packs yesterday, or those of her Aurors who had abused Hawthorn Parkinson? Could they expect mercy?

Priscilla would have said yes a while ago, when Harry still acted within limitations. Now she horribly feared the answer was no. If Harry had set himself up as judge and executioner, then it almost certainly was.

She could not go to him on the off chance that she might make things better. She was no clever thinker, to come up with new laws. She enforced them, and she would not be able to stand by and silent if Harry insisted on doing things without the rule of law, or fudged matters because one person was a werewolf and another wasn't. She would only be a thorn in his side, rather than a help.

And neither could she remain in the hypocritical Ministry that had betrayed everything she believed in.

Priscilla took a deep breath, drew out parchment and quill and ink, and began to write her resignation.

"I don't know how to react. This is so far outside anything that I ever imagined happening."

Connor had listened to an answer like that for the last few days. He had always been patient. He had always patted Parvati's shoulder, and told her that he understood, and that he found it overwhelming sometimes, too. Then she would turn around and lean her head on his shoulder and cry, and Connor could stroke her hair and marvel over how ordinary all this was, and how it wasn't the kind of life he would have expected to have after twelve years as the Boy-Who-Lived. He liked it that Parvati wasn't a shining heroine of the kind that his mother had once whispered he would marry, because no one else deserved him. She was someone he had to work to deserve, just as he was sometimes a person she had to work to deserve.

But he thought this particular phase had gone on for long enough. They were Gryffindors. They ought to face what was bothering them. Parvati was hiding from the monster under the bed. Connor, though, thought that the best way to get rid of a monster hiding under the bed was to challenge it to a duel.

"Parvati," he said.

As if she knew what he would say, her shoulders tensed, and she stared at the far wall of the sixth-year boys' room, empty except for them. Ron had cleared out easily, with a look Connor didn't have to work hard to interpret. Seamus and Dean were working on homework down in the Gryffindor common room. Neville was—somewhere.

"I think we have to choose how to react," Connor went on. "Draco joined Harry, and he's loyal to him. And most of Harry's allies are Dark wizards. If we think they're doing the right thing, then we have to accept the fact that sometimes Dark wizards can do the right thing."

"We don't know if they're right," Parvati whispered.

"You think the Ministry is?" Connor would be thunder-struck if she thought that. She had often told him how much she liked Remus, and how she wished he could have come back to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. She was not prejudiced. Connor knew his girlfriend better than that.

"No," said Parvati. "But I just don't think that anyone is. How can they be? They ought to talk to each other, not toss around magic like they don't know what they're doing."

Connor thought for a moment. "Harry's burst of magic frightened you, didn't it?" he asked. She had done strange things before when she was frightened. Managed to hold innocent remarks against Harry, for example. She had also held not-so-innocent remarks against Draco, but Connor couldn't blame her for that. He had done the same thing, and he wasn't afraid of Draco; he just thought he was a right git most of the time.

"Yes," said Parvati, tense as a bowstring, sitting with her arms wrapped around herself. Connor wanted to hug her, but she looked as if she would shrug off the embrace, so he kept his hands at his side. "How could—I didn't know that he was that powerful, Connor. It was enough magic to destroy the school."

"Yes," Connor had to agree, because he really didn't think she was wrong. "But he didn't."

"But imagine if he came back and got angry," Parvati whispered. "What if he wasn't able to restrain himself? What if he hurt someone?"

"He's restrained himself so far," said Connor, and felt his face heat up. "Think of the patience he had with us during that last week he was here. Do you think he wouldn't have made our heads explode if he really wanted to? He must have wanted to, and it didn't happen. I don't think you need to worry about my brother's self-control, Parvati. Besides," he added, because he knew this had been a problem between Harry and Parvati somehow, though he still didn't know

exactly how, “you know that I love him and want to spend time around him. Would I really want to do that if he was a barely leashed killer?”

“I don’t know,” Parvati whispered, ducking her head. “I just really don’t know, Connor. I told you that I needed to have time to think about this.”

Connor narrowed his eyes. “And you’ve had some time. Now tell me your decision. Are you going to start saying tomorrow that you support Harry? Or are you just going to sit in scared silence like all the other rabbits?”

“It’s not that simple,” said Parvati. “Maybe you can trust him because he’s your brother. But what if he got angry at me and decided that he needed me gone?” She rushed on before Connor could object to that. “I did trust him before, somewhat. He went through all those awful curses the Ravenclaws fired at him, and never lost his temper. But this rebellion, and the magic he released—he’s changed, hasn’t he? How do we know he isn’t going to come back to the school and be so different that he might hurt someone, even if it is accidentally?”

“We don’t,” said Connor evenly. “But we can’t go around living in fear, Parvati. It’s stupid and not very Gryffindor. And I swore the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, that I would think rationally before I acted. I wasn’t thinking of those around Harry and Malfoy. Now I’m trying to do better. And I say that we give Harry a chance. Until he actually make someone else’s head explode, I don’t think there’s a reason to believe he will.”

Parvati sat in silence, head bowed.

“Well?” Connor prodded her.

She looked up at him, eyes flashing, and he realized they’d stepped beyond the boundary of her tolerance. “I do have the right to think about this on my own, you know,” she snapped. “You made up your own mind quickly, but that doesn’t mean that I need to.

"Yes, you need to," said Connor, his own temper rising. "Because I need to know if I can count on my girlfriend to support me, or not." So far, there was little open opposition to Harry's rebellion in the school, but there were lots of stares and loud questions about whether Connor was sure that Harry was right. It was lonely. He wanted Parvati to stand at his side, or make up her mind to stand on the opposite one. Then he could argue with her, loudly, and have a different way of handling things.

Parvati shook her head, furiously, and her eyes shone with both anger and tears. "Don't push me, Connor. It's not that simple. It's not."

"So you're on the opposite one, for right now," said Connor, and pushed back from the bed, and stood up. "All right, then. That's really all I wanted to know." He glared at her. "So you can leave, now. This is my room, after all."

"Shared with four others," said Parvati, but she tossed her hair and got off the bed. "We're going to talk about this later, Connor," she said, catching his gaze and holding it.

Connor had one of those surges of intuition that he received sometimes from Merlin knew where. "Why?" he asked quietly. "Why are you surprised? You were the one who claimed to know how important spending time with my brother was to me, and you were the one who comforted me when Harry was too busy to notice. Are you actually surprised that I don't want to choose between you? Or were you counting on me to choose you?"

Parvati turned away and padded to the door, but not before he saw her deeply wounded look. Connor stifled the impulse to go after her and apologize, and instead flopped down on his bed and crossed his arms over his chest, huffing.

He was right, damn it.

This was really dangerous. She couldn't even Apparate. And if her family found out what she was doing, then they would punish her so severely that she cringed just thinking about it. She'd probably have to have a guard every time she left the Gryffindor common room, and

her mum would probably get Hermione to do it. And Hermione would do it, because she would be horrified, too.

But Ginny didn't care. She had felt Harry's magic, and it had inspired in her a yearning she'd never felt before, to be there. It wasn't as if she could concentrate on homework lately, anyway. Who cared about writing some stupid three-foot essay on the proper way to prepare chopped liondragon scales, where there was a war going on out there and she had to be part of it?

She'd packed all her clothes and all her school things; she wasn't going to leave something behind, just in case they found her gone before she could reach Harry's valley and got Hermione to cast a tracking spell on something she owned, which Ginny had heard Hermione talking about being able to do. Her trunk was shrunk and in her pocket; she'd had to wait a day because she hadn't mastered the Shrinking Charm on the first try. She had left the common room with a casual remark about homework and the library, carrying a book; she didn't think anyone had noticed it was one of her textbooks, which she shrank the moment she was out of sight and tucked in her robe pocket, too.

Then she walked briskly towards the Quidditch shed, looking over her shoulder every now and then, but trying not to be too obvious about it. She was a Chaser on the Gryffindor team this year, and she could claim that she wanted to go to a late practice if someone caught her. It was late, but not that late, just before dinner.

She planned to get on her broom and fly west and south. She knew how to keep out of sight of Muggles; that was one thing Arthur Weasley had taught all his children early, since they lived near plenty of them. And the track of Harry's magic was still hanging in the air, the sweet delicious smell of it. Ginny knew she could follow it.

She made it down the stairs to the first floor. She made it through the stampede of students heading for the Great Hall early. She made it to the doors.

"Ginny?"

Ginny felt her back stiffen and her fingers twitch, reaching for her wand; the instincts Moody had trained into them for the Midsummer battle last year were still functioning. Then she reminded herself that the whole point was not to be caught, and there were still people passing towards the Great Hall. She couldn't act like this was anything unusual.

She turned around and pasted a smile on her face. "Yes, Neville?"

Neville blinked at her and shuffled his feet. "Where—where are you going?" he asked. He had a pot in one hand, and a plant in it. Ginny didn't recognize it on a quick glance. He was probably taking it out to one of the greenhouses, though.

"Out to practice," said Ginny. At least Neville wasn't on the Quidditch team, and was unlikely to know their schedule. "I missed the Quaffle seven times during our last practice, can you believe it?" She faked a little laugh, and hoped no one was listening, because it sounded horrible to her.

"Oh. B-but—" Neville bit his lip, then took a deep breath and said, "But Ron is in the Great Hall already. So how can there be a practice?"

Damn. Damn bloody damn. Ginny controlled the impulse to just Stun Neville and make a run for it. She might make it to the Quidditch pitch and grab her broom before anyone stopped her, but it was unlikely.

On the other hand, Neville had been part of the dueling club, too, and he'd fought in the Midsummer battle. There was the chance that he just might understand. Ginny darted a glance left and right, and saw no one watching them. Even the cluster of Hufflepuffs passing right by were talking about dinner and speculating about whether there would be treacle tart for dessert tonight.

"Listen, Neville," she said, and stared into his eyes. She'd found that intimidated people. "I'm running away to join Harry."

“Why?” Neville whispered. At least he had the sense to keep his voice down.

“Because I feel so useless here,” said Ginny bluntly. “And there might be something I can do there.” She winced as she said the next words, but she had to say them. Moody had taught them too well. Useless bodies in battle weren’t worth the time it took to protect them. “I can fight, if he needs someone to do that. And even if he just needs people to chop potions ingredients and help with mundane tasks like cooking—because he’s not getting food from house elves, now—I’d rather do that there than here. I feel like—I have to do something to help. I can’t just sit in Hogwarts and ignore what’s happening.”

Neville considered her for a long moment. Ginny shifted from foot to foot, and hoped he wouldn’t make it much longer. Someone was bound to start looking at them sooner or later. If he did it for a minute more, Ginny promised herself, she would Stun him and run, consequences be damned.

Finally, he smiled. Ginny blinked, her hope rising. Does he understand? Is he going to let me go?

“You can come with me,” Neville whispered.

Ginny stared at him. “What?”

Neville flushed pink, but nodded. “I—he asked me to research plants that could help stop Indigena Yaxley,” he said. He hefted the pot in his hand. “I’ve finally developed this, but Professor Sprout said that she doesn’t want to send the seeds to Harry. She had relatives killed by werewolves too, y’see. So I’m taking the plants to him, and then, if he tells me to leave, I will.”

“How are you going to get there?” Ginny whispered back. Neville was hopeless on a broom.

“Gran’s taking me,” said Neville proudly, his ears picking up the flush from his face. “She said that she’s happy I’m taking my responsibilities seriously. So I’m going.” He smiled, and Ginny thought she saw a glow of magic around him, bright and content. He

had been so happy last year when the Light had called on him to contribute magic to Harry's fight against the wild Dark, she remembered. "She's meeting me on the outer edge of the grounds in five minutes. She can Apparate us both."

Ginny grinned. She couldn't wait until they both got to Harry and he saw that he had more help than he'd ever imagined.

"You're the bravest of them all, Neville," she said. "Even his brother is just sitting around here."

Neville flushed and smiled, but luckily didn't stammer. In fact, he swept a ridiculous bow, nodded to the doors, and said, "Shall we go, my lady?"

Ginny laughed, and hooked her arm with his, being careful not to jostle the pot he carried. "Lead on, my gallant knight."

"Hermione? I'd like to talk to you."

Hermione marked her place in her book with a finger and looked up. "Changed your mind about the Grand Unified Theory, Zach?" she asked sweetly.

His face mottled with red. "I asked you not to call me that," he hissed at her.

"You also asked me not to remind you that I was Muggleborn, last time we talked." Hermione turned to face him, trying to stir her face from the distinctively evil grin it wanted to settle into. "By all means, Zacharias. What have you come to talk to me about this time?"

Zacharias took several deep breaths, but if that was actually an effective way of calming himself down, Hermione had yet to see it. She studied him and waited. He was handsome enough, she supposed, and he had taken some effort with his robes this morning.

But that was the point. Hermione wouldn't have minded if he wore fine robes; he had money, he could afford it. But he had chosen

robes that had a badger over the heart, and badgers dancing all along the hem, as if he wanted to remind her he was of Hufflepuff's blood. Hermione didn't think he needed them. The badger-shaped scar on his cheek said that he was of Hufflepuff's blood, and, more, it documented the risk that came from that, and how Zacharias had accepted the risk anyway, and gone angry into war for love of her. Why he wanted more than that—why he wanted to make her think he was an arrogant pureblood instead of a wizard who would use whatever magic he possessed to avenge his loved ones—was beyond Hermione.

"I think we should be friends again," said Zacharias.

"Just friends?" Hermione asked.

He flushed once more and shook his head. "More than that," he said. "I love you, Hermione."

"I think I could love you too, Zacharias," said Hermione consideringly. "But you haven't given me much reason lately to think that you love me. You talk about my having to abandon all the things I'm interested in if they're Muggle. You don't want me to visit my parents, or you want me to 'educate' them in how to be the parents of a pureblood witch and the grandparents of pureblood grandchildren. And you want me to marry you right out of school. What if I don't want that?"

"But that's the way everybody does it!" Zacharias exclaimed. "Then you can have time later to work on whatever you're interested in. You raise the children first, and have heirs. But you're going to live at least a hundred years, Hermione. Do you really want to be raising children when you're forty-seven or fifty-five? You do it when you're younger."

"If and when I marry and have children, I wouldn't think of it as a chore to finish as soon as possible, or just a way to have heirs," said Hermione quietly. "I would treat it like a good thing, an important thing, because it deserves to be treated that way." She pushed a curl of her hair behind her shoulder. "But I don't even know if I want children, Zacharias. Not right now. Maybe I'd change my mind in a few years."

He stared at her, and couldn't seem to think of anything to say.

"I know," said Hermione. "I know that you want children to have heirs. But I'm not pureblood, Zacharias. I can learn the rituals and wear the clothing, but I'm not going to think like one just because you want me to. I don't care about securing the next generation of the Smith line. I wouldn't care if we had a child who was a Squib, and I would try to make her life as easy as possible. I don't care that much about the definitions of Light and Dark, except that I think the Light does make things better for Muggleborns in general. I can't care about the things that you want me to care about. The Grand Unified Theory just showed that up, not made it happen. I think we would be awfully unhappy if we did get married." She leaned forward and held his eyes. "Don't you think so?"

"Hermione—"

"What?"

"My mother—" said Zacharias, and stopped.

"I know," said Hermione, and shrugged. Even though Zacharias was legally the adult heir of the Smith line, since they preserved the old custom of majority coming at fifteen instead of seventeen, Zacharias still craved his mother's approval. Hermione had met Miriam Smith briefly last year, when she'd come to the school to ride one of the golden horses. It had been a brief and chilly meeting. "But you did say in June that you loved me, and that you didn't understand pureblood ideals if they made you reject someone like me. What happened to that, Zacharias?"

"There wasn't this—thing then," said Zacharias stiffly.

Hermione took a deep breath. "So it would have been all right for you to say that you loved me and didn't care I was a Muggleborn in the privacy of our own home, but outside it you would have cared what people said and did about you having a Muggleborn wife?"

"Hermione, there are people who will be happy to help us and sell to us and trade with us," said Zacharias, putting a hand on her arm. "As long as you behave like a pureblood. But if you go around saying

what—you say, then they'll get offended. Surely you can see that? They're all representatives of very old families. Muggleborns who are too loud threaten them."

I did misjudge him. Hermione met his eyes. "It's fun to make people think I'm a pureblood," she said. "But it's not enough any more. They're going to think I'm some kind of—trained monkey in the end, once they find out the truth. I want things to really change, Zacharias, and fitting in won't do it."

He looked at her, his face a picture of misery, and then turned and left the library. Hermione supposed that was an improvement over their last two fights, which had ended with them screaming at each other.

She sighed and turned back to her books. Revolution hurt. Rufus barely studied Priscilla's resignation before he tossed it into the fire. He knew it would be serious. Priscilla always was.

He sat back and put his hands together, and took several deep breaths. What he planned to do would have been easier if Priscilla stood with him. No matter.

"Sir?" Percy Weasley was watching him anxiously from behind his desk.

Rufus stood. He would have Percy, and the two Aurors who had been with him when he went down to try and stop Harry's invasion of Tullianum; embarrassment about their utter failure to do anything that day seemed to have made them more loyal. And he would have help from Aurelius Flint, he was fairly certain. There was a portrait on the wall of his office, one of a parrot, and Rufus's grandmother Leonora had proven amicable to slipping into it now and then and conveying information to Flint that the Unspeakables couldn't hear. At least, Rufus hoped they remained unaware of it.

And there were allies outside the Ministry, if he chose to call upon them.

"Sir?" Percy repeated.

“Come with me,” Rufus ordered, and the younger wizard fell into place behind him, no questions asked. There were times, Rufus thought, when Auror training was definitely good for something.

He made his way to the door of his office and stood there, his hand resting on the knob. The moment he opened it, then things would change, and he would lose what was at least a secure seat in the middle of the maelstrom, even if it was no longer a comfortable one.

He reminded himself it was secure only because no one considered him worth paying attention to anymore, and opened the door. The two Aurors who waited outside snapped to attention.

“Come with me,” he repeated, and they hastened to do so. Rufus strode up the hallway, walking fast enough that he didn’t think his bad leg showed.

He was going to get his Ministry back.

Chapter Thirty-One: The Ritual of Cincinnatus

Rufus met Aurelius Flint on the fourth floor, at the entrance to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Flint had two other people with him, muffled in cloaks. Rufus eyed them sharply before he relaxed. The cloaks were dark green, not gray, and really, while he still thought Flint might betray him, he wouldn't do it via the Unspeakables. Flint seemed to have as much reason to be tense around and frightened of them as Rufus did.

"Only two?" Rufus asked, in the low voice, less piercing than a whisper, they'd taught him to use on Auror raids. He looked Flint in the eye, and saw him make a shallow movement, more bob of his head than nod.

"Fewer willing than I thought," he said.

Rufus could understand that. There were some people who, driven against the wall, would gather their courage and be willing to stand up and fight the Unspeakables, but there were many who were too afraid, or simply determined to retain a neutral position where the Unspeakables would have no reason to bother them. Rufus had been one of the latter himself at one point. When he'd become Head Auror and then Minister, he had to deal with the Unspeakables, but he still thought it better to remain outside their webs when possible.

So we are seven. Rufus let no one see his grimace. He could only hope that Griselda Marchbanks had managed to sweet-talk nine people into coming with her. Of course, he needed to hope for a lot of things, including the luck to reach Courtroom Ten safely.

"This way," he said, and made for the walls. He carried the stone plaque that would grant them access to the Ministry's inner staircases in his pocket; he had also hoped he wouldn't have to reveal its existence to any strangers. If Flint had gathered others, then perhaps—

Rufus cut off the thoughts with a shake of his head. Blaming his comrades was a bad move. He wouldn't get any more.

He touched the plaque to the wall, and the wall yawned. Rufus looked down into the darkness, and wondered if it was a metaphor for what they were walking into. The Unspeakables had plenty of magic he didn't understand. Would they step down into the staircase and never emerge? Or would only their bodies come back, talking and smiling, their minds locked into new thoughts or altered by Unspeakable artifacts? They would have to pass far too close to the Department of Mysteries for Rufus's liking.

You are thinking too much.

Rufus put his foot on the staircase leading down.
"And you think you are ready?"

"I think I am."

Joseph said nothing, but Snape had learned to read his silences. The Seer was not convinced. It had only been a few days ago, he might as well have said, that Snape was struggling to rebuild his mental walls after one of the dreams. Did he want to go to Harry as a guardian, or the burden he had turned out to be when he couldn't control his own temper in a house with werewolves? And in Woodhouse there would be many more werewolves, including the one who had threatened to infect him and reached out and placed her hand on his arm...

Snape shrugged the memory away, and slid the last vial into the traveling case. Those were thickly padded with bicorn fur to insure that the glass stayed intact through the vagaries of Apparition. They would have to be. Joseph had never seen Woodhouse, so Snape would have to Apparate them both, along with all the Potions supplies he intended to bring with him.

"What will you do if you aren't ready?" Joseph asked the question of the walls, the door, the hearth, everything but Snape.

"Make myself ready."

"You cannot know—"

Snape turned around and fixed him with a sharp eye. "Yes, I can," he said, with an intensity, if not a volume, that seemed to convince Joseph to shut up. "I was—weak before." He grimaced, but this was a man he had already told far more damning and humiliating weaknesses to, so he pushed himself to speak. "I preferred to remain within my own head and content myself with my bitterness, how no one would ever understand me, and that others were lauded as heroes while I, who had done far more, received stares and sneers and sobs." He held up his left arm, and shook the sleeve back to force Joseph to confront the Dark Mark. He had noticed the Seer still found it hard to look at. Sure enough, he glanced away, and Snape calmed as he regained a measure of control over the situation.

That had been the problem all along, he thought. Control. He had allowed others to define him. He had snapped at the werewolf's taunting as if he were once more a schoolboy. He had flung objects at Harry's head as if he were younger than that—a child of four or five unable to control the simplest and most laughable impulses. He had endured the dreams with the ultimate weakness. A stronger choice would have been to accept the Seers' help with them from the beginning, or else to take Dreamless Sleep and avoid them.

The moment he had grasped the fact that he had no choice and began pulling himself out of the pit with both hands, his life had improved. He still required Joseph's help, but even his need for that was lessening day by day. And with a small number of simple techniques rooted in the more disgusting memories, he had more and more control of their interaction.

He had always known that about himself. It was why he had such an affinity for Potions, why he had hated Walpurgis Night, why he had wished there was some way to control what happened to Harry long after it became clear there wasn't. He needed to feel as though there was something he controlled. The focus had needed to change from his wallowing in self-pity to his life, and that had actually worked when he made the change.

"And now that is done," Snape continued. "Now I have remembered once again that many of my enemies and those who hurt me are

dead or in confinement—“ reminding himself of James Potter rotting in Tullianum had helped hurry his recovery enormously “—and that those who remain will never grant me the respect I wish as long as I hide in the past. I know that while I remain distant from Harry, others could influence him in ways I would not approve of. No one will grant me the gifts I wish to receive. I must take them.”

“I fail to see,” Joseph said, in the water-voice, “how that life is different than the one you were living before you came to the Sanctuary.”

Snape met his eyes and felt able to really sneer at him for the first time. The Seer could glimpse souls, find words that irritated and pinched and forced Snape to think of things he would rather not, and persist through flares of temper that would have made even Dumbledore back off. But he did not know everything, and with this remark, he proved how little.

“Because I intend to keep having the dreams,” said Snape. “I intend to keep talking to you. Is that not why you came from the Sanctuary? To keep me talking?”

Joseph frowned. “Yes, but I will not allow you to simply put everything back together the way it was. You can’t. The walls are shattered, and there would only be death, if not for you, then someone else—“

“I understand this,” Snape interrupted. “But I need no longer make healing my sole passion. I have advanced far enough in it that I can do other things at the same time. That is what Harry once said he would do, and what I have finally gathered enough courage to join him in. It is foolish to think the healing could be completed all at once, when you yourself said it would take years.”

“Years that you need,” said Joseph.

“Years that I do not have,” Snape snarled, “when my son is at war—“ he had also gathered the courage to call Harry by that name in Joseph’s hearing, now “—and I could aid him in ways that no other can or will. I will continue the healing. I will speak with you. I will have the dreams. But I will not become a whimpering patient and then a

new man. I will have more of the past in me than you approve of.” He took a step forward, and Joseph backed away, the first time he had done so. Snape exulted inside, but kept it off his face. “Harry did the same thing, though it took me some time to realize that. He did not become the Slytherin hero I wanted when I first started training him. He changed. His present is always marked by his past. Like father, like son, I would say.”

And like past, like present. The dream two nights ago had reminded him that he had been a good actor, that when he first came to Dumbledore he had carried the weight of two Lords’ gazes on his shoulders and made them both think he was their man. That his convictions had shifted later was of no matter.

He should have remembered that he could fool most everyone he chose, when he wanted to make the effort.

He would act as if he were more healed than he really was. This time, he would allow no taunting werewolf to pierce his shields, any more than he had allowed Lucius Malfoy’s taunting to do the same when they were both Death Eaters. And in time, the act would become reality, the lie truth.

Joseph, he saw, had nothing to say in response to his declaration. Snape raised an eyebrow and turned to make sure the final set of vials was securely packed.

That journey downstairs in the darkness was one of the most surreal Rufus ever experienced.

He expected, at every step, to be stopped. Or perhaps the walls, barely seen in the light of the Lumos carried on Flint’s wand, would blur and time would stretch around him, and he would wake in his office with new, Unspeakable-planted, thoughts in his head, and think this had all been a bad dream. He accomplished each step, and still he knew the next one would be the end of this. Even wondering why the Unspeakables had let them get this far if they knew what he intended did not ease Rufus’s worries. They would be waiting at the end. They would be waiting on the next turn of the staircase. They

would be waiting in Courtroom Ten when he opened the door, if by some miracle they got that far.

And then they reached the bottom, and opened the door onto the tenth level of the Ministry, into the corridor where Draco Malfoy had stunned him. Rufus blinked for a long moment. There were no Unspeakables in sight.

There would be, at any moment.

He led his people past the hidden door of Tullianum, and through another door into a different corridor, the one that most visitors were likely to see, if they were summoned to stand before the Wizengamot. He frowned as they walked up it, because something was different. Some pressure and presence of magic he usually felt was gone, or something new had been added. He could think of only two candidates. Neither was good news. Either the Stone had noticed them and was extending its influence into the tunnel, or the Unspeakables had removed the wards that usually guarded the place and were no more irritating to a trained Auror than music in the background. Yet there was no sign of the Unspeakables.

Flint gave a loud sniff beside him. Rufus glanced at him, unable to decide if that had been a snort of contempt or not, and then realized it was an actual sniff. Flint's nose was wrinkled, his eyes studying the corridor ahead as if he would force the stones to give up their secrets.

"What is it?" Rufus asked.

Flint shook his head, but his eyes didn't stop scanning. "Familiar smell," he said shortly. "Smelled something like it before, on some of the artifacts we handled. Don't know what it is, though."

Rufus had to accept that. They reached the door of Courtroom Ten, the one that led to the gallery, and stepped through it.

The room was empty, and so quiet that the echoes of their footsteps sounded as if there were half a hundred of them. Rufus shut the door behind him, still tense. Flint's information had indicated that Courtroom Ten was specifically warded against the magic of the

Stone—something one of the Ministers had done years ago, so that the Wizengamot's decisions would be truly objective, without influence from the Department of Mysteries. Rufus could have laughed at the idea that the Wizengamot would manage objectivity at all, outside influence cut off or not, but he had been too grateful at the news that a place might exist where they could talk unheard by the Unspeakables.

And too pessimistic, at the same time, that they would ever manage to use it. He looked one more time for the Department of Mysteries people he was sure must be here. Nothing and no one greeted his eyes. The room remained empty, and since they had stopped walking, the loudest sounds were Flint's sniffs.

Rufus looked out into the vast sunken courtroom with the single chained chair where Minister Fudge and Severus Snape and Harry and Harry's parents had all sat in their time, and shook his head. He wondered if he would ever stand trial there. If Amelia Bones or someone else took the Minister's office, he probably would.

But things had gone too far. He had to take this risk, even if it killed him or threw him out of office—and he suspected it would.

He turned to his people. "Griselda Marchbanks is coming, with enough other people to make a difference, I hope," he said, and drew his wand, his gaze going to Percy and the two Aurors who had followed him down. "Flint, I'll ask for an oath from you later, and your companions, if you are sure they can be trusted to give one."

"They can," said Flint. One of the green-cloaked wizards moved his head in a nod. And Rufus had to accept that, because they needed the numbers.

He turned to Percy, whose mouth was open. "I need you to swear an Unbreakable Vow, Percy," he told him quietly, catching his attention less with the words than the use of his first name. "What we're going to do here cannot leave this room, and I'll need you to tell a number of extremely dangerous lies to safeguard it. Can you do that?"

Percy's eyes were wide, though less wide, Rufus noticed, than the ones of the second Auror who had followed him downstairs. He shook his head, but not in denial. "I don't understand, Minister. What is this?"

"Invocation of a tradition that most wouldn't expect me to invoke," said Rufus, with a small smile he knew was nasty, "because I don't have enough people. But what I need is bodies. There are going to be seventeen of us here, if all goes well—a third of the number of the Wizengamot, and one of them the Minister. That's what we need. Of course, we also need all our stories to agree."

Percy swallowed, the click in his throat bouncing off the walls. "Unbreakable Vows kill you if you don't fulfill them," he whispered.

"They do." Rufus refused to look away from his face.

Percy stared into his eyes as if he'd never seen him before. Rufus looked back. He was fairly sure Percy's loyalty was to him, not his family and not the Ministry and not the Auror program, but if he was wrong, this would be the time he found out.

"What happens if I refuse?" Percy breathed.

"Then you'll be Obliviated," said Rufus. He made sure Percy heard the regret in his voice, and also the adamant. "We can't take the chance that you'll be questioned under Veritaserum and give away our secrets."

Sweat broke out on Percy's forehead. Rufus didn't move, didn't flinch, didn't blink. He could have cast a modified version of Imperio on Percy and made him follow through, but he wouldn't. There were certain standards one did not break, no matter how far one was willing to descend.

The thought came to him that perhaps an Unbreakable Vow wasn't that different from the Imperius Curse, when all was said and done. Rufus put it aside. It was almost certainly true, but truer was the fact that he couldn't afford to deal with it right now.

Percy passed the test. He exhaled through his nose and nodded, his face pale as salt next to all that bright red Weasley hair. "All right, sir." He knelt.

Rufus knelt with him, and reached out to clasp his hand. He looked up at Flint. "Will you be our Bonded?"

"Certainly, and welcome." Flint stepped forward and aimed his own wand at their joined hands. Rufus took Percy's eyes in a gaze that was not going to allow either one of them to blink.

"Do you swear to hold secret the truth of all you see here?" Rufus asked.

Percy swallowed again, but said, "I do." Flint nodded, and a narrow stream of fire shot out of his wand and encircled their hands. Rufus felt it slide and tickle along his skin, and for a moment he was forcefully carried back to a night sixteen years ago when he'd made an Unbreakable Vow of his own, one he would probably refuse now if he could.

He shook his head. The First War is behind us. "Do you swear to tell the lies we shall ask you to tell, up to and including to members of your own family or others you trust with your life?"

"I do." Percy's voice was a little stronger this time. The fire moved again, and now their wrists looked as if they were bound in a knot. Rufus moved his gaze to those bonds as he asked the third and final question.

"Do you swear to remain loyal to all those you meet here, no matter who they are or what they ask of you?"

Percy jolted. Of course, he didn't know most of those people or who they were. He held Rufus's eyes for a long moment, asking without words if he could actually trust strangers, and then he bowed his head. He had come this far, his slumped shoulders said. He might as well go farther.

"I do," he answered softly.

The bands of fire coiled tight and sank into their skin. Rufus hissed out a breath and then stood. He held Percy's hand for a moment longer than necessary, squeezing, he hoped, hard enough to brand the impression into skin and bone. It was the only thing he could do, since he couldn't apologize and he couldn't say that the Vow would be broken someday, if Percy was patient and kept his silence. That wasn't true. It would always need to hold, or Rufus would have chosen some lesser form of commitment.

They weren't spinning history here, he thought, as he turned to face the two Aurors who had accompanied him down. They were spinning lies, but it was the lies that would become the history, not the truth. The truth would go behind guarded tongues to the grave.

The first of the two Aurors, the woman called Hope, stared at him for a long moment. Then she knelt and held out her hand for his. Rufus repeated the oath with her, seeing her eyes watching him with less trust than Percy's but something deeper behind them. She understood what was happening here, he thought, probably better than Percy did.

Then came the second Auror, a young man barely out of training, called Frederick. He stammered and looked away and mumbled and flushed, but he knelt in the end. Rufus felt a sense of peace settle on him as the last words of that Vow were said. Now he could take his own, and Flint and the ones with him could take theirs.

"The Vows are a good idea," said Griselda Marchbanks's voice abruptly from behind them. "But my allies will back it up with their own magic, since the Unspeakables might have a way around the Vows for all we know."

Rufus turned. Griselda was there, and she had brought the required number of people with her, so they could truthfully say there were seventeen of them at this little meeting.

Rufus had thought they would be humans, though, not goblins. Hawthorn leaned on the door, gently, until it opened. Then she peered in through it. None of the others had been willing to disturb

Harry, but none of his other close allies, the ones he might accept an interruption from, could move as silently as she could.

She saw him dropping the final pinches of a shredded plant into the potion that simmered in the vial in front of him. Then he closed his eyes and bowed his head. Hawthorn felt the same ripple she'd encountered before, when Harry yielded his magic to help Peregrine's wolves, move into the liquid. It gave a shiver, and then it turned the color of silver. Hawthorn flinched in spite of herself.

Harry turned and looked up at her; perhaps her flinch had made her arm brush against the door. "Hawthorn," he said. "You can come in." He gave the silver liquid a final, thoughtful glance, then sat down on the chair waiting beyond the table where he'd brewed the potion. Those were the only pieces of furniture in the room. "Was there something wrong?"

Hawthorn shook her head, and, taking out her wand, Transfigured a piece of dust on the floor into a chair she would have to remember to Vanish later. Woodhouse's rooms were so narrow that extra furniture simply crowded them. "No, Harry. We just—" And then she paused again. One reason she had been the one to volunteer was that she might be able to find words where the others couldn't. And now that she was here, she found Tonks was right. What she was about to say sounded stupid.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Parkinson?"

She didn't want to provoke that from him, though, that retreat into formality. And perhaps the best thing she could do was engage him with informality. Treat Harry like a Lord, and he responded like a servant. Treat him like a person, and he often didn't know how to hide.

"I'm not, Harry," she said. "I was worried this afternoon. We all were."

Harry frowned. "I know that George is a bit of a loud-mouth, ma'am, but I don't think all the new werewolves share his views. Most of them know that they can't just go home as long as the Ministry is hunting them. A few of them were berating him the moment he finished

yelling. He hates being a werewolf, yes, but some of them have learned to accept it, or think they can. And they know that they don't really have a choice but to fit into the valley right now. I don't think we have to worry about the werewolves from the Department turning on us in battle. If the Ministry were offering shelter and safety to everyone turned by Loki's bite, then yes."

"That wasn't the reason we were worried," said Hawthorn. "He accused you of not killing Loki when he had the chance."

Harry's frown grew more pronounced. "I know he did, ma'am. I was there."

"And you started to grow angry, as anyone would at an unjustified accusation," Hawthorn said. "Then you closed your eyes, and your magic stopped rising and your anger vanished as if it had never existed."

"Of course it did," said Harry. "I put it away."

That was the answer she had been afraid of. Severus Snape had owled her when Harry's parents were first arrested, with copies of the memories of Harry's training he had retrieved from Dumbledore. Hawthorn knew about the box or the cage that had contained a great deal of Harry's emotions at one point, and she knew that he could not be allowed to build another. At best, it would be a temptation for him to go on putting emotions into it even when there was no reason to do so. At worst, it would become a permanent weakness for him, and at some point in the future would open and do more mental damage.

She reached out and clasped his hand. "Where did you put it?" she asked.

Harry tried to pull back from her, but only managed to retreat to the end of his arm. Hawthorn saw his eyes change again, but then the emotion was gone and Harry was settling back into the chair, as if he couldn't imagine why he'd wanted to move away from her in the first place. That frightened Hawthorn more than all the rest, and made her sure was doing the right thing.

"In the Occlumency pools," he said. "The way Professor Snape taught me to."

Hawthorn breathed in and out, holding his eyes. Harry just looked at her with polite puzzlement.

"Harry," said Hawthorn, "we're concerned that you're shedding your anger too quickly. If you keep too much of it suppressed, it could break open—in the midst of battle, perhaps, but there's no telling when it would happen. And then it could hurt those who are dear to you as well as your enemies."

"That won't happen," said Harry, with the same confidence he had exuded after he'd thrown his magic in the Ministry's face.

"Why not?" Hawthorn asked.

"Because that's why I'm controlling it," said Harry. "So that I won't yell the wrong words at the wrong moment, or upset someone else's healing with rage when they need calm."

Hawthorn hesitated, wondering if she should tell him the rest, but decided it had to happen. Otherwise, he would be caught by surprise. He had other people watching, but they did not have a werewolf's nose, and his pack was focused on Harry to the extent of ignoring other packs.

"I think Peregrine and her wolves need anger," she said. "So do some other packs, like the one I helped escape, who were attacked out of the blue and are frightened and enraged. They need to know that you take this threat seriously. They arrive here, and you're so calm, Harry, so coldly determined. They would like to see a bit more fire, to reassure them that you won't make a compromise at the expense of their lives."

Again a shadow moved across Harry's face, and again it vanished between one blink and the next. "I'm doing what I can," he said, and nodded to the silver potion on the table. "That's the first stage of a cure for lycanthropy, I think."

Hawthorn stared. "What." She felt so much sheer astonishment that she could not ask it as a question.

"I think so," Harry went on earnestly, staring over his shoulder at the potion. "The problem is, the potion has to be made by the person whom the curse clings to. That means that you'd have to brew the potion to remove your own wolf, for example. A potion I brewed would do you no good."

"I could do that," Hawthorn whispered. "If—if this is true, Harry, why hasn't it been discovered before?"

Harry looked at her with a sad smile. "Because it's also a poison that has a sixty percent chance of killing lycanthropes," he said. "One of the major ingredients is silver, and the potion turns silver, too. That's fatal to werewolves, even though it isn't to most other kinds of curses." He shivered. "And it requires the willing sacrifice of magic. No matter what happens, that magic is gone from you forever."

"I could do that." Hawthorn found she couldn't take her eyes from the potion. "I made part of my magic into a ring for your partner. I can remove it, willingly sacrifice it."

"That won't work," Harry said quietly. "That kind of sacrifice slides the magic into a solid object, or makes it into a solid object, like the stone on Draco's ring. The potion is a liquid." He hesitated, then continued, "Also, the reason that most willing sacrifices work is that the witch or wizard yields his magic to gain something he or she wants more. You knew that Draco would be indebted to you, for example."

Hawthorn nodded.

"Only part of this sacrificed magic is supposed to go into the potion," Harry confessed. "A tiny part. The rest is simply wasted, spent on the air. Not many witches or wizards can muster the will to sacrifice their magic and leave themselves permanently weaker with so small a potential reward. And without will, of course, a willing sacrifice doesn't exist."

Hawthorn shifted uneasily, trying to keep from looking at the potion. It didn't work. The silver gleam only seemed to make it more tempting, not less, even though it had caused her to flinch when she first saw it. "I think I could stand the loss," she said.

Harry shrugged. "There may even have been some wizards who fit all that criteria and managed it," he said. "But the potion recipe is rare, the ability to muster the will and pass the magic into the potion is rarer—and, of course, it doesn't work at all for those werewolves born Muggle—and then the fact that the poison could kill most of its victims makes people reluctant to try it." His mouth quirked with a smile that Hawthorn might have called bitter, but she couldn't read the shadows underneath it in her fascination with the potion. "At least, they tend to live under the werewolf curse."

"Why did you make this, if you knew it wouldn't work and you aren't a werewolf?" Hawthorn asked softly.

"To see if it would work." Harry rubbed his forehead. "I can regain the magic I put into the potion, since I'm an absorbere. And that same thing allows me to pass the power into a liquid; it's just a matter of opening my gift and pouring the magic elsewhere, not using a spell. I was hoping to learn a sure way for someone else to put his magic into the potion, if he wanted to do it. But I didn't learn anything useful. I'll experiment with the recipe, next time. Some substitutions won't make it explode, and might produce differences in the final result."

Hawthorn nodded in distraction. The potion was useless, she reminded herself. And even if she managed this on her own, there was no guarantee that it would work instead of kill her.

But she could not stop thinking about what would happen if she did manage to brew the potion and drink it. And if it was not poison, then when she woke as a pureblood witch again, what would her life be like?

She could hardly imagine it, and she didn't know if that was because she really had forgotten what it was to be human, or because so many evil things had happened to her that she could not imagine good fortune.

Harry's touch on her arm brought her back. "I promise, Mrs. Parkinson," he said gently, "if something happens with this, if I can brew a cure, then I'll let you know immediately. But I should start the second batch now. Some of my ingredients won't keep fresh for very long."

Hawthorn nodded, and let herself be herded out the door. She wanted Harry to have absolute calm for his experiments. Who knew what he might discover?

She did pause on the way up the corridor, certain she had forgotten something she'd meant to say to Harry, but then the wondrous possibilities of that potion preoccupied her mind again, and she shook her head and forgot it.

"Griselda." Rufus couldn't take his eyes from the goblins, particularly one large female who stood next to the Wizengamot Elder and appeared to have chains actually braided into her flesh. "I—I didn't know that you were bringing these friends. Are they here as witnesses?"

"They're here to make up the seventeen we need to complete the ritual," said Griselda bluntly. "This isn't just a human cause any more, Rufus. I knew that you might be nervous if I brought werewolves, and I don't think I could find any right now anyway, with how thoroughly they've gone to ground." She was a tiny old woman, but when she tilted her head up and her eyes stared at him through a mass of wrinkles, Rufus was the one who felt small. "But goblins are magical creatures. Free magical creatures, who are willing to help me for the same reasons I've helped them in the past, and to have a voice in the wizarding world's future course."

"Free," said Rufus, since that was the word that had leaped out at him most, if only because of Griselda's emphasis.

"Yes," said the female goblin. "We are slaves no longer, Minister. We have no reason to keep serving you, except that we desired to keep our freedom locked in stone until the best moment for releasing it." She smiled, showing a mouth full of unfortunately pointed teeth, no

less bright than the chains woven around and into her skin. "Our web has been gone for more than a year. Now is the time for our moving."

Rufus breathed in and out, and tried to think. Granted, he knew very little about webs, and less about the ancient wizards and witches who had woven them. Guilt and lies and forgotten history had covered up so much that, when he'd tried to learn what he could about them, he mostly found historians engaged in blaming other factions for the necessity of webs in the first place. "Does this mean," he asked at last, "that you would no longer serve in Gringotts?"

"We have not served since our web was broken," the female goblin said. "I am the hanarz, and I lead my people again. Our magic has returned, since it is no longer bound. And we have stayed in the bank. But if you do not grant us a part in this, now, we will withdraw."

Rufus tried to imagine their economy collapsing, and could not. The devastation that it would do to not only the British wizarding world, but those other communities who had financial ties to Britain, was intense. And the goblins were the only ones who knew how to open most of the vaults, the only ones who knew the ways past the traps, the only ones who knew to the Knut how much money each vault contained.

They could have held us hostage at any time, he thought. They waited this long to show us they were serious, and to put themselves in a position where we wouldn't have the chance to refuse, I suppose.

He had no choice, literally, and not only because they needed seventeen people for this. Traditionally, the choice to place the Ministry's control entirely in the hands of the Minister had to be made by seventeen people, a third of the Wizengamot, in the room where the Wizengamot most often met. That pulled an old ritual into play and set wheels turning that would, Rufus hoped, keep him safe from the Unspeakables long enough for deeper changes to take place.

He had avoided doing this so far because he had seen no way to persuade sixteen members of the Wizengamot to agree to it, and he had still hoped to avoid what was essentially short-term dictatorship. Then he had studied the wording of the old documents again and discovered that they said seventeen people, a third of the number of

the Wizengamot, not actually “a third of the Wizengamot.” He needed seventeen bodies, and he needed a way to insure that those other people would not tell the truth about what had happened, and he needed to locate sixteen Wizengamot members—well, fifteen now, since Griselda had joined him after all—to Obliviate and convince them they had voted this way. Actually kidnapping the Wizengamot members and bringing them to Courtroom Ten would have been too risky, too likely to attract the Unspeakables’ attention, and would have taken too long to arrange—and there was no reason for them to agree, once they were here.

The goblins would agree, if he agreed to certain other things. Rufus needed them as much as they needed him, he suspected. They must not want open war, or they would have declared it already.

He watched the hanarz, and Griselda Marchbanks standing implacable beside her, and knew they must have reasoned this all out already. They were only waiting for him to catch up.

He caught up. “Your people will swear the Unbreakable Vow?” he asked the hanarz, barely restraining himself from asking Marchbanks if the goblins would. He had to treat them as equals, and speaking to a human about them in front of their faces was not the way to do so.

“We will,” said the hanarz.

Rufus nodded, and then turned to the wizards with Flint. “I’m going to ask you to remove your hoods now,” he said. “I want to know who I’m swearing to before we decide this.”

They did so, and Rufus received his second shock of the night. It didn’t come from the witch standing on Flint’s right, a hard-faced woman whom Rufus didn’t know, but suspected worked in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

It came from the wizard on Flint’s left. Tall, pale, cool and blank-faced as he met the Minister’s gaze—Lucius Malfoy.

Harry frowned and studied the bubbling potion once more. He should have made it do more than bubble when he’d added the pinch of

comfrey. He wondered if he had read the recipe wrong, and turned his back to fetch the book.

Luckily, therefore, his eyes were not aimed at the potion when it exploded. Harry felt the flood as a rush of sticky coolness across his back, which soaked his shirt and his robe and felt almost soothing for a moment before it began to burn.

Harry shoved the pain into an Occlumency pool and dropped to the ground to roll as he stripped the clothes off with smooth movements. A good portion of the potion came off, but some still remained. Harry heard himself make a noise of annoyance, but it all felt distant, as if it were happening to someone else. He just rolled over and over, and shook his head when he felt his scalp beginning to burn, before he concluded that he would need water.

He conjured water above himself, and let it flood down with an enormous splash. That quieted the burning on his scalp and across most of his back and shoulders. Some places, though, still continued to hurt as if the potion were acid eating into his skin. Harry stood and looked over his shoulder, to see that globs had dripped down and were clinging to his lower back, edging towards the base of his spine.

The door opened then—well, opened was a mild word; it was more like it flung itself open—and Snape strode in.

Harry stared at him, caught so far out of his zone of expectation that he had no idea what to say or do.

Snape took one look at the potion, sniffed, grimaced, and snatched up a handful of comfrey leaves waiting on the table Harry had set up on the far side of the room. “The source of the pain cures the pain,” he lectured as he stepped forward and pressed the leaves against the drops of silvery liquid on Harry’s back. Harry let out a loud sigh and closed his eyes; the acid-like burning dropped away as if potion and leaves had ceased to exist together. “When you’re working with demiguise hair and powdered bicorn horn, at least. And you were, weren’t you?”

Harry sighed again and peered up at Snape, trying to feel something other than sheer surprise. "What are you doing here, sir?"

"Rescuing you," said Snape tartly, and dropped what remained of the smoking pinch of comfrey leaves on the floor. "Guarding you." He caught Harry's chin and tilted his face up, staring directly into his eyes. Harry, confused, allowed that, and Snape's face bore a truly alarming scowl in the next instant. "What have you been doing to yourself with Occlumency?" he asked, giving Harry's shoulder a sharp shake with his other hand. "It is a good thing that I came when I did. I doubt anyone else here would have recognized it."

"I've been suppressing my anger, and letting compassion and sympathy and determination through, so that I can keep working and give people what they need from me." Harry rubbed at his eyes with his hand. Legilimency that keen always made them water. "Shouldn't you be back at school and recovering, sir?"

"Joseph agreed that I was well enough to come to Woodhouse." Snape picked up Harry's stained robe and shirt and flicked his wand at them. Most of the potion vanished. On consideration, though, Snape handed only the shirt to Harry. "The robe is ruined beyond repair," he explained shortly. "And you should know that suppression of emotions is dangerous, Harry."

Harry felt the anger rise, but he grabbed it automatically and smoothed it back under the surface of the Occlumency pool as he pulled the shirt on, reminding himself that while Snape might have been well enough to come, he would still be recovering. "Thank you, sir," he said stiffly.

"No one else has spoken to you about this?" Snape demanded.

"They tried," Harry muttered, wondering why he felt like a sulky child. This was Snape. He knew how to deal with Snape now. He extended understanding and compassion as much as he could, while keeping in mind that Snape might always want distance from him. It was not all that different from his relationships with most everyone else, except that he loved Snape more and Snape was more damaged.

Snape had no right to put him in a child's role again, as if he really were still Harry's guardian, rather than one to be protected.

"And you distracted them, I would assume." Once again, Snape caught Harry's chin and looked into his eyes. "No more. I am here now, and I am not so easily distracted."

Harry felt discomfort squirm like a worm in his belly. He had trusted Snape to handle things like this, once upon a time, but that had changed, and why should it change back? Snape was not fully recovered. And if Harry let the Occlumency barriers fall apart, then he might start yelling at people who didn't deserve it.

Some of them would prefer that.

But some of them wouldn't, Harry pointed out, with the more reasonable side of himself, and pulled away again.

Snape didn't seem to be angry. Harry eyed him cautiously. Either the new Snape or the old one would have snapped at him—the new one for Harry upsetting him in the midst of his own pain, the old one for putting himself in danger by suppressing emotions and dropping comfrey in a volatile potion. This Snape only nodded and said, "It shall take some time, of course."

"You should be back at Hogwarts, sir," Harry tried again. I don't think he can play the role of guardian, even if I need one. And I can't let myself depend on him and be let down again, not when so many people are depending on me. I can't. "You should be taking up a challenge that's easier than this one, if you do think you're partly healed. Teaching a Potions class all the way through and actually talking to the students, for example."

He supposed from the flicker of Snape's eyelids that that stung. But it only won him another nod and said, "I did not expect to walk back into your life and be welcomed with open arms, Harry. I meant that. It shall take time."

"Listen," said Harry desperately. "Sir. Please. I can't—I don't trust you the way I used to. I trust you to heal at your own pace, and to know

what's best for you most of the time. I trust Joseph to protect you. But I don't know what you'll do in a valley full of werewolves, and I don't know if I can trust you to—to take care of me the way you seem to want to." The words sounded embarrassing as they fell from his lips, and he could feel his cheeks heating up. Harry grabbed the embarrassment and smoothed it under the surface of the Occlumency pool, too, so he could face Snape with adult calmness. Stammering and flushing like a teenager would only convince Snape he was in need of care. "Please. If you stay here, you'll find a place, I know that, sir, but it won't be as my guardian."

"Yes, it will," said Snape.

Harry stared at him. Merlin, I want to trust him, but how can I?

"In the meanwhile," Snape added, without a change of expression, "you should wash. A swift soaking spell will not clean the rest of the potion off as a shower will."

Harry nodded. That, at least, made sense. He turned to leave the room and go to the loo, feeling Snape's eyes on his back the entire time.

He felt two emotions fighting in him, both too strong to be shoved into an Occlumency pool right away. One was a frantic concern. Snape shouldn't be among people who would upset him yet. His barriers were too fragile. Joseph might think he was healed, but he'd tended Snape in isolation. Who knew how he might act in company? Who knew what harm he might be inflicting on himself, standing here?

The other was a desperate yearning to trust Snape as Snape insisted he could, to have someone who didn't need constant consideration of his more delicate feelings and wouldn't care if he yelled, to be able to lean on someone else.

The clash hurt, but Harry had accepted that most of his emotions would. He would wait until these grew less passionate, so he could tuck them away. Then it wouldn't really matter how much he trusted Snape; he would still be able to react, and think, rationally.

"You," Rufus said.

Malfoy only smiled at him. The smile had no content, Rufus thought, cold and blank as a winter sky. "Me," he agreed. "And I will swear the Unbreakable Vow with you, Minister, and I will participate in this ritual. I said that I would. I made my choice."

"Why?" Rufus demanded. He realized he was aiming his wand at Malfoy, and that both the woman who had come with Flint and the goblins were shifting uneasily. He didn't care. This was Malfoy. The memory of battling him in the midst of a flesh-eating rain had never quite left Rufus, and he had long since suspected that Malfoy interfered more in the Ministry than he let on, that some of the people who should have been loyal to ideals of justice and law were instead loyal to Malfoy's coin. He could not believe the bastard would dirty his fingers with something this risky, rather than watching as the Ministry thrashed itself to death and then picking over the corpse.

Malfoy shrugged. The motion barely disturbed the pale white-blond hair that lay on his shoulders, and it barely disturbed his composure, either, it seemed. "Because things have not turned out as I hoped," he said. "Because certain promises were made and not kept. Because those I counted my allies have turned on me in ways I did not anticipate."

"I heard that you disowned your son," said Rufus. "Did you really believe that that would make Harry happy?"

A slight widening of those pale gray eyes was all that remark earned him, that and the words, "Do not speak of what you do not understand, Scrimgeour. I am ready." He knelt and held out his hand, poised as if he would crush the one laid in it. "Or do you really intend to swear Vows only with those who already pant at your heels like dogs?"

Rufus restrained himself from a snarl with difficulty. He knelt and clasped Malfoy's hand. It made no attempt to put pressure on his. It was barely a weight. Holding Malfoy's gaze, he said, "Griselda. Will you be our Bonder?"

She stepped forward, and Rufus demanded the same three terms of Malfoy that he had demanded of Percy and his Aurors. Malfoy swore them without complaint, without flinching. Rufus didn't think he blinked, either, but perhaps he simply timed his blinks to Rufus's own, and thus hid them.

When that was done, Rufus had to take his own Vow; honor would allow him to do no less. Malfoy asked for the vows without a hint of mockery, which made it worse. Rufus pulled away as soon as the ritual was done and turned to take Griselda's hand, feeling as if he had held a corpse's fingers.

They all swore to the oath alike, human and goblin, and so put themselves on an irrevocable path. It was far more dangerous than a vow to simply be loyal, Rufus thought, as he swept them over again with his gaze. There were things in existence that could make them tell the truth, Veritaserum foremost among them. If the Unspeakables captured one of their little group and forced Veritaserum down his throat, that was the end, because the potion would force them to tell the truth, and the Vow would kill them before they could.

Committed. Changed. Altered. The faces that stared back at him were uniformly anxious—except for Malfoy, who probably wouldn't show much more emotion than a vampire even now, and the goblins, whom Rufus had no practice in reading.

Rufus took a deep breath, and held his wand high. The Minister had to begin this ritual. "I arrive at this moment," he intoned in Latin. "I come to the turning of the world and foresee darkness ahead for wizard and witch, and death for those laws we have kept sacred. I am the Minister of Magic for Britain, and I ask that you hand control of the Ministry over to me, for I am the one who knows the path through the darkness."

He saw a silver mist emerge from the tip of his wand, and form into a shape. He waited, mildly curious, even through his desperation, to know what the shape would be. The ritual documents had said only that it would be an animal symbolic of the situation at hand.

He suffered a moment of shock as it became a wolf, and then shook his head as the wolf loped over to sit down at his side. Of course. I should have known. What else could it be, given what's caused this unrest?

Griselda spoke the next part of the ritual; they had decided that was safest, since she was the only actual member of the Wizengamot in the room. "We hear and heed you," she said, also in Latin. "The Minister knows the path through the darkness. The Minister can bring peace to us, but only if we give him the power to do so." She faced the people, both human and goblin, who had drifted into a loose circle around her. "We are seventeen. We stand in the room where the Wizengamot has met most often for the two years. Do we grant power to the Minister?"

"Yes," said the hanarz, in English.

The other goblins replied one after another, their voices harsher and more croaking than anything human. Rufus could feel the magic in the room growing stronger, and now he could smell what he thought Aurelius Flint had smelled, the unusual, stony tang of goblin magic. Flint must have encountered it on goblin weapons and other objects that his Department dealt with. Rufus found it hard to breathe as it surrounded him, imprisoning him in a block of invisible marble. The silver wolf sat motionless at his side.

"Yes," Griselda echoed, when that finished, and turned to the wizards.

"Yes," said Flint.

"Yes," said the woman who had come with him.

Malfoy held Rufus's eyes, long enough to make Rufus wonder if he would choke to death before the bastard made his choice, and then inclined his head and murmured, "Yes."

Percy, Hope, and Frederick gave their answers almost at the same moment, as if they were desperate for this to be done with. Rufus understood. Now he felt as if his body had turned to stone, and he could barely lift his wand and speak the next part of the ritual, the part

that sealed the end of it and subjected his mind to examination by the magic—and was the reason, apart from the distrust and independence of the Wizengamot members, that so few Ministers had ever invoked this particular form of control. Rufus had to be sincere in his desires. If he were doing this for his own personal power, and nothing else, the magic would kill everyone in the chamber.

“I promise,” he said, again in Latin, “to lead us through the darkness, to bring us to peace in the end, and to lay down the crown I carry when I am finished with all the reasons I call this power. In the spirit of Cincinnatus, who yielded control when his task was done, I speak, and in the spirit of no Emperor.”

The pressure grew inside his head. Rufus felt as if hands held his brain. He felt the magic looking at him for a moment: a presence cool as Malfoy, with little interest in why he was doing this or who he was. It examined him to make sure he was the Minister of Magic, as he’d claimed to be, and it examined his intent and his motives. Rufus closed his eyes as the pressure increased steadily into agony, and tried to think thoughts that were as truthful as he could.

And then the silver wolf tilted its head back and howled, and leaped into the air. Rufus opened teary eyes to see it multiply, many small wolves rising up the walls and running into the ceiling of the courtroom. He blinked, and wondered if he should feel any different. Of course, perhaps the pressure flooding out his ears was release enough.

Then he felt it. His fingertips tingled, and his muscles jerked as if he’d received a lightning shock. He felt tiny threads grow from his eyelashes and the strands of his hair, and the awareness of wards grew in the back of his mind like so many small birds chirping at their mother.

The others were watching him, he realized, and waiting for an answer.

“It’s done,” he whispered. “I control all magic used in the Ministry.”

Chapter Thirty-Two: The Hills In Their Might

Rufus waited. He had sent Percy and the others on their way immediately after they'd emerged from Courtroom Ten, having handed them the names of Wizengamot Elders he wanted them to find, Obliviate, and tell the story about their having voted Rufus power to. He'd glanced dubiously at the goblins, but Griselda, who was staying with him to support his story just in case someone arrived earlier than they expected, had assured him they could find the Elders and perform the Obliviate.

Rufus suspected that meant at least one of them had a wand, and the ability to use some wizard magic, probably from some wizard blood. It had been illegal for goblins to have wands for several hundred years—a provision that most people accepted as common sense, and which most goblins didn't apparently care about.

He didn't say anything about it. Laws could change, and they would have to.

"What can you feel from the Department of Mysteries?" Griselda asked now. She sat in a chair in front of his desk, holding a cup of magically warmed tea. Rufus had granted permission for any warming spells to be performed in the Ministry, as long as they were only strong enough to warm a cup of tea. It was an odd thing, that granting of permission. He needed to locate the spell spluttering in the back of his mind, unable to form until he agreed to it, and then nod or shake his head. If he nodded, the spell went forward. If he shook his head, the spell died, and no one else could perform that kind of spell in the Ministry, either.

It was a frightening and exhilarating power, even if it was bounded by the walls of the Ministry. Rufus supposed he was discovering what it was like to be a Lord-level wizard.

He wondered that Harry had not gone mad with the power, either with the temptation to use it or with hatred of it.

"Little," he answered Griselda now. "It's closed off. The Stone's pulses are dimmer than before, and vary with my breathing. I think all

their artifacts are under my control now.” He sipped at his own tea, but it didn’t soothe him the way it usually did. He knew what the newspapers would say when he made his announcement. Minister Gone Mad—at least one of them, probably the Daily Prophet, would use that or a variation of it. There would be claims that he was crazy with power, that he was a child playing a game he didn’t understand, that he was in collusion with the werewolves to bring the Ministry down. Dionysus Hornblower would be ecstatic, Rufus thought sourly. The man considered himself a rebel oppressed for all his pure blood and his money, and he would love to be able to see Rufus as a personal enemy.

“You think?”

“If they’re within the walls of the Ministry, then I can control them,” Rufus told her. “They’ll have to receive my permission to function, and I won’t grant that if I don’t know what they do, or if they’re intended to harm someone. If the Unspeakables took the artifacts out of the Ministry already, there’s not much I can do to prevent the Unspeakables from using them.”

Griselda nodded grudgingly, accepting that. Then she said, “And what about this Stone? It’s sentient, isn’t it?”

Rufus inclined his head. “And I can no more keep it from plotting and planning than I can control your thoughts just because you’re in the Ministry. But if it tries to use magic, it has to come through me.”

“You’re not going to have an easy time of it for the next few days,” Griselda murmured.

Rufus shook his head this time. “No, I won’t. I’ll be taking Pepper-Up Potion and wishing there were more hours in a day before I’m done with this. But that’s what I knew would happen when I invoked the Ritual of Cinnatus. I have no reason to complain.” He squinted thoughtfully at Griselda. “I’m more curious about your reasons for being there, Griselda.”

The old woman snorted, a formidable sound to come out of such a tiny body. “Why should you wonder, Rufus? You know that I’ve

always been in close contact with the goblins. I was part of the ritual where they freed themselves. This is the best chance for them to make their freedom mean something more than a war against the wizarding world. If they make themselves indispensable to solving your problems, then you'll have to listen to them when they demand certain concessions from you."

"And for you?" Rufus persisted.

Griselda gave him a cold smile. "You think that I must have some tie to the goblins, Minister? A goblin ancestor? A goblin husband?"

"No," said Rufus. "But I've never understood what began your support of them. Why you cared. You can't say it was because you were a compassionate witch. I know many compassionate people who don't think about the goblins, who just accept them as there to be our servants."

She nodded. "But I was the one who looked, and the one who thought, Rufus. And if I had to make compromises and become part of alliances that I found distasteful in my years as an Elder, at least I preserved that one motive uncorrupted. At least I knew I was fighting for one thing purely good.

"And then Harry came. He is vates. He is the actual fulfillment of hopes that we thought were going to be disappointed for as long as we both lived, the hanarz and I." Griselda shrugged. "I'm one hundred and sixty-seven years old. I certainly thought that I would die before a vates arrived.

"I didn't. And now that world is possible, and I may have a chance to see some of the future come true myself, before I have to go." She fixed him with a steely eye. "I'll make the world better for my friends. And I'll make the world better for the vates who freed them, if at all possible."

"I am fighting for the Ministry," said Rufus. "And for your goblins, perforce. That's not the same thing as fighting for Harry."

“You’ll restrain his enemies,” said Griselda. “You’ll change the Ministry’s stance towards werewolves. Both of those are enormous gifts to the rebellion.”

Rufus said nothing. He had the feeling that Griselda would take what he had to say badly, and he was distracted by the tickle in the back of his mind. A few people were trying to use the Floo to arrive in the Ministry. He granted permission, and let them come in. But he could almost feel their wariness as he felt the magic. Someone would be suspicious about why the Floo connections had taken so long to work, and then someone would try to cast a spell that had nothing to do with warming tea, and then the better-informed would guess.

Rufus intended to tell them the truth before then. His allies had had several hours to reach the Wizengamot members and Obliviate them, so he would have to hope that he could produce the men and women who had “voted” him into power when all was done.

“Come with me, Griselda?” he asked.

She nodded and stood. “Tell me, Rufus,” she asked, “when do you have to give the power back?”

“When it doesn’t help me any more,” said Rufus. “When I know that I’ve accomplished the task I set out to accomplish. That’s not in anyone else’s eyes, mind you, but mine. And my mind could change. Something I think is necessary now might turn out not to be necessary after all. If that’s the case, I’ll need to complete this ritual earlier than I suspected.”

“Otherwise, the magic will kill you,” said Griselda.

Rufus gave her a grim smile of his own as he opened the door and went to tell his people that he was their dictator for now. “And all our allies, too. There’s a reason that Ministers didn’t often invoke this ritual, you know. They usually couldn’t find anyone to stand with them.”

Snape had decided that his first order of business—well, if one did not count rescuing Harry from the explosive potion, and then settling his effects into one room and ignoring Joseph, who took the one next

to his—ought to be talking to those who had seen Harry in the past few days, and finding out how bad his use of Occlumency pools was. He stepped into the kitchen, confident that Harry would still be in the shower.

Camellia was sitting at the table, and she stood up when she saw him. “You,” she snarled.

Snape didn’t wish to be unoriginal, so he simply looked at her and didn’t respond. He knew she might have spent time around Harry in the past few days, but he would learn nothing useful from her. Either her hatred or his own fear would overcome what she might say. He turned on his heels to find someone else.

He heard quick footsteps crossing the floor towards him, silent but not silent enough; she was human right now, not a wolf who could pass through the forest without a twig snapping. He turned, and let her see his face, rather than his wand. He wore the expression he had used when he killed victims among the Death Eaters who didn’t matter to him personally. He let her see that she didn’t matter to him. She was only a piece of flesh and blood that stood in his way. He denied her any independent existence, any past outside this moment.

Camellia flinched and cowered. He had expected that. Harder people than this werewolf had done so, and the werewolf’s strength was the pack. Or the alpha, perhaps, but Harry wasn’t nearby right now.

That was the best way to shut them out, Snape thought. He couldn’t control what they read in his scent, but he could control what they read on his face, and there were few werewolves who trusted their noses over their eyes. They spent most of their time as humans, and humans were visual creatures. Feed them the right expressions and the right gestures, and they would have to question whether he was really afraid.

He said nothing, and left the kitchen with a ferocious stride. A simple Point Me led him towards the bedroom where Harry had spent most of his time, and where he was showering now. Snape was glad to find Draco standing in the half-open door, staring towards the loo as if he

couldn't figure out what had possessed Harry to bathe in the middle of the day.

"Draco."

The boy startled most satisfyingly, and then turned around. "Sir," he breathed, his eyes widening only a bit before they narrowed. "What are you doing here, sir?" he asked, with a frigid courtesy that reminded Snape of Lucius. "Have you only come to hurt him?"

"Save him from himself, rather." Snape snapped his fingers and gestured with his head, and Draco responded automatically, moving out of the way so that Snape could enter the room. Snape concealed his smirk. Draco had spent years thinking of him as the Slytherin Head of House and someone with almost parental responsibilities; that he would obey him was a good thing, and let Snape know where the point of control was in their interactions. "I found him in the midst of suffering from an explosive potion that hit him across the back."

Draco caught his breath. "Is he all right?"

Snape nodded. "He'd removed most of it. I applied comfrey, which caused the mistake in the first place, to it, and then sent him to take the shower." He raised his eyebrow and looked at the chair at the end of the bed, and Draco took it. Snape remained standing, as he would have in the classroom. "He will live through it with no scarring and only faint burns," he reassured Draco. "What I want to know is other behavior he's been exhibiting during the past few days."

"Such as?" Draco had his shoulders set tight and his chin lifted. Snape knew he would have to tread carefully. He was Draco's professor and Head of House still, somewhere in that young mind, but Harry was Draco's partner and, by now, surely lover. If Snape ran into too much of a protective wall, he would get nothing from him.

So he would have to show Draco that they were allies in this, that they might need to cooperate in saving Harry from himself as they had so often in the past.

He decided that a bit of bluntness, honesty on a subject Draco wouldn't have known about for himself, was in order. "When I looked into his eyes, I could see Occlumency shields impeding the progress of normal emotions to the surface of his mind," he said, and saw Draco's face twitch. "He's been preventing himself from feeling angry. Most of it simply fades. That which does rise, he sinks. He's been doing the same with other emotions, including fear and desperation. He told me himself that he lets sympathy, compassion, and determination through. What he neglected to mention, and what I could see from the state of his shields, is that it's nothing else. He's been living in a distant shell for the past few days, hasn't he?"

Draco was staring at the far wall, and his face twisted with an anger that did not at all resemble Lucius's, somewhat to Snape's surprise. Then he remembered where he had seen it before: on Narcissa's face, when she told Snape the tale of how Harry had left his mother's house on Christmas Eve almost three years ago. "That's what it means," Draco breathed. "I did notice he was withdrawing, but I thought the pressures were overwhelming him. He wouldn't talk to me, but he always seemed to be working on that damn werewolf cure, or talking to werewolves, or reassuring other people that Woodhouse would protect them whether or not the wards were in place, or—doing something. And then he'd climb into bed and use a Sleeping Charm on himself, because he said he would lie awake worrying otherwise. He's been making himself into someone who can answer the pressures, whether or not he really can." Draco stood and kicked the leg of his chair. "The bloody bastard. Why didn't we notice?"

"You did not know the mechanism," Snape murmured, his mind working hard. He could not simply burst through Harry's shields and insist that he express the emotions he'd been suppressing. That could be disastrous, given the tendency of Harry's emotions to influence his magic. Besides, Harry would probably feel anger at him before anyone else, and that wouldn't help Snape in winning his trust back. "And abuse of Occlumency can look like competence to someone who does not realize what's happening."

"Talking about me behind my back, sir?"

Snape turned swiftly. Harry had come out of the loo, his clothes firmly back in place; at least he'd retrieved a clean shirt. His hair still drizzled and dipped water, and his glare was steady.

Snape chose the truth. There was no other tack that would work. "Yes," he said calmly. "Knowing that you would not tell me this."

Draco stalked past him and halted in front of Harry. Harry stared at him, then looked away.

"Do you think that I, or anyone else, wants you to sculpt yourself into something you're not, just so that we can win this war?" Draco asked him. Snape couldn't tell if his voice was actually calm, or simply bereft of any emotion but a building anger, strong as a tsunami. "None of us do, Harry. We understand limitations. We all have them. We're all human. And that you've been making yourself surpass those limitations, not because you really have the ability but because you can twist your emotions like a puzzle..." Yes, building anger, Snape realized, and the anger was here now. "It's a cheat, and it's stupid, and it's a lesson that you should have learned by now. And it's going to fail, probably at the worst moment."

"I have no choice," said Harry, voice pitched low. That surprised Snape. There was a time when Harry would have snapped back that of course he had changed and learned his lesson, and couldn't Draco see it?

Then he remembered for how long Harry had been sinking his emotions, and grimaced. Harry didn't differentiate now between anger that would do harm and anger that would do no harm. He'd probably sunk any irritation he felt as soon as he felt it.

"I have to win this rebellion," Harry went on, looking up. "I have to be the kind of leader who doesn't flinch anymore. I'm the one who took up the responsibilities, and said I would do them. I shouldn't have done that if I was going to fail, because the people depending on me deserve better. And there's no one else I can hand the task over to. So I'm doing what I have to to get through it, Draco. Yelling at people won't help. Nor will working myself into exhaustion. I understand that, now. I know what I need to do, so I'm doing it." He shrugged, eyes

locked with Draco's. "And I won't fail simply because I have the urge to shout at someone else, or lose my temper over something stupid. That's something children do, not adults."

Snape felt a moment of profound sadness. Harry believed that, it was plain to see. He wasn't skating on a skin of rotten ice as he'd been when he tried to ignore his abuse. This conviction went all the way down.

They would have to work hard to get through it.

"You're still an idiot," said Draco. "The reason leaders can get so much done, Harry, is that they delegate. Assign someone else to work on those projects you think you need to sink your emotions for. I know that Mrs. Parkinson would love to work on the werewolf cure. And if certain werewolves do nothing but snarl when talking to you, then have them talk to someone else. You don't need to do everything, Harry. That was the lesson you told me you'd learned and didn't."

"Certain werewolves will talk only to me," said Harry. "That's the way of it, Draco. I know they aren't perfect." He smiled briefly. "They're human, after all. Some don't like me, some don't like other packs being here, some don't like the situation. And that's normal. How can I get upset over that, when the motivations behind it are so normal?"

"Tell them to talk to other people," said Draco. "Tell them to shut up for right now, because you can't just send them home. Or come back and yell in private, if you don't want to yell in front of them."

Harry shrugged. "There isn't a reason to yell later, either."

Snape moved, then. Draco would dash himself against the walls of Harry's Occlumency until he hurt, and achieve nothing. Harry's Occlumency was entwined with his thinking processes to the point that he was saying things he would have known were irrational at once in any normal frame of mind.

But Harry had shown his anger in front of Snape.

He took a step forward, and Harry's gaze came to him. At once, his shoulders tensed and his eyes hardened. He even backed a step away. Draco started and glanced over his shoulder, then moved silently out of the way.

"You shouldn't be here," Harry breathed. "You're not healed."

"And neither are you, if you can speak such nonsense," Snape retorted. He remembered the trick Harry had played on him when he said words he would have taken back a moment later. He waved his wand, and the spell captured the words Harry had spoken a moment before and played them over so he could hear them.

"There isn't a reason to yell later, either."

Harry's face paled as he listened. Snape repeated it, and repeated it, and, before he set it singing for a fourth time, he asked, "Would you agree that that is true of anyone else, Harry? Draco? Myself? Your brother? You who were so understanding of my anger, and Draco's, and your brother's? You, who yelled back at us when you felt unfairly pressed on the matter of Rosier and Durmstrang? You, who found anger a source of strength when you battled Voldemort?"

Harry bowed his head. "Those were all different situations," he whispered. "This has to be handled with diplomacy and tact, or the werewolves are in danger, or people are in danger from me. I already made things worse by yelling at my brother when he fought with Draco, and then ignoring him for two weeks, just because I was angry."

"Your brother is young," said Snape. "And not the standard for all intelligence and all emotional reaction." He was tempted to add thank Merlin, but he didn't want Harry pushed into defending Potter. "That does not mean you must never get angry at anyone else again, Harry. With this example in front of you, you are unlikely to ignore anyone for two weeks now."

Harry's breath was rushing now. For some reason, Snape thought, it was much harder for him to maintain his calm and patience around

his guardian—perhaps because he was still so surprised to see him here, perhaps because he knew Snape could read his mind.

“I know I’m going to make mistakes,” Harry whispered. “But the mistakes are so much more severe in their consequences now that I have this many people depending on me, and the anger usually makes things worse. How can I be sure that it won’t make things worse if I get angry?”

“Decide from situation to situation,” said Draco impatiently, before Snape could speak. “You’ve always said that, Harry. You’ve always done that. I don’t understand why this is so different, why you’ve locked yourself into this shell. Why?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know,” he whispered.

That took less time than I thought it would. Snape was wary of his capitulation, for that reason. It might be false, and Harry would retreat behind his walls again the moment he was alone. Snape wanted to follow it up, and make sure that Harry’s lack of a rational answer meant he had changed his mind.

Draco again moved before he could, catching Harry’s chin and tilting it up. He was smiling now, where Snape would have thought he would be scowling. He kissed Harry. Snape raised an eyebrow as the kiss went on, but ruthlessly controlled the several sarcastic comments that he would have used if he had caught them snogging in Hogwarts’s rose bushes. If he could control his interactions with others, then he could control his own responses.

“You don’t,” said Draco. “And this is another mistake, Harry. That’s it. It hasn’t caused irreversible damage yet. It might, though, if you let it go on. Will you repair it before then, Harry? Yes, it’ll be harder than what you’ve been doing, but—“

“Nothing is ever simple,” Harry finished, and he had a smile on his face, and if he avoided Snape’s eyes for now, at least it was much better than what he might have done.

Snape could have said many things just then. He might have done so. But then Harry's head lifted, and the blaze that filled his eyes was, if not anger, so passionate that Snape paused to admire it.

And then Harry said, "They're attacking Woodhouse."
Woodhouse was angry.

It could ignore the small rushing things. Why should it care about them? What they did in their lives outside the valley was not its concern. And as long as they were inside the valley and did not try to move or hurt its parts, that didn't matter at all. They might strike at each other. That was almost expected. But Woodhouse would dream around them, and past them, and soon they would be gone and other small rushing things would take their places. They lasted less than the life of one tree, and they could not even dream of matching one of the hills in age.

But its stones and pebbles and blades of grass and air were all aware now, because of the leafless tree that had entered the dream and made itself part of it. And there were small rushing things coming towards it who wanted to hurt that part of it. That was wrong. They could have other small rushing things, but not that one anymore, because it was part of Woodhouse.

Creatures swooped through the sky. They had four legs and feathered wings and other creatures seated on their backs. Those sitting ones carried magic that was not part of the magic of the valley. So long as they only flew, they did not matter.

But then they entered the air above Woodhouse, and it felt their hostility towards its leafless tree. They had four legs, and feathered wings, and creatures seated on their backs.

And they had lungs.

The air above Woodhouse turned around and left them alone. Small rushing things could not survive without air, and winged creatures could not fly without it. They fell. Their legs kicked, and their lungs gasped and cried. Woodhouse did not care. They tumbled on the grass, and the grass turned and swept over them, binding and

drowning them. Legs were seized and held. Small rushing movements stopped. Woodhouse was a master of the game of stillness, while small rushing things needed to move. It bound them, held them. They lay still, and that meant they could not hurt anything that was part of itself any more.

Small rushing things appeared on the hills. Woodhouse had shut off the tunnels through nothingness that most of the two-legged things used to reach the valley, but these had opened them anyway, through devices of magic that buzzed and stung like bees not of Woodhouse stinging bees that were of Woodhouse. The valley was angry.

The devices of magic rose, and aimed into the valley. They would strike the grass, if Woodhouse let them. They would hurt the leafless tree.

But the small rushing things had legs, and they stood on the hills.

The hills danced.

Ripple and shake and shudder and shrug. Not a large dance. Nothing like the dances that Woodhouse remembered being part of it when it had been larger than it was now, and the earth had danced for joy to music that played out in the oceans, and the hills had changed their very shape. Just a small movement, and only in the hills, not the grass, because movement in the grass might hurt the leafless tree and the houses and the trees.

Such a small dance, and the outsiders lost their balance. They rolled down the hills, and into the grass. The grass wrapped them in moments, and held them still, and air went out of their lungs, and stones leaped on them. They had tried to hurt Woodhouse. They had hurt it, by carving tunnels where no tunnels should be. That was wrong.

Outsiders came through the pine woods, small rushing things that the stones and the grass let through, because they could not sense hostile intent. And then they reached the pine woods and cast flames at the trees.

Woodhouse did not like flames.

The pine trees lashed their branches and gathered the small rushing things into their embrace, drawing them close. Then they were not small rushing things anymore, because they could not move, but leafless trees. But they had not entered the dream and not asked Woodhouse to protect them. They had attacked.

The pine trees could bear storms, bend and thrash before them, and if they shed needles and lost branches, at least they were still alive when the storm ceased. But Woodhouse knew that the leafless trees could not bear storms. The pine trees gripped them and twisted their branches, and they broke. Then they dropped the leafless ones under their roots and grew over them, and that ended that. They were gone, and Woodhouse looked around for other attackers.

There were others on the very fringes of Woodhouse, sensed by pebbles and grasses, but they vanished, stepping into what was not Woodhouse and carving their tunnels through nothingness. They had learned.

That satisfied Woodhouse. It looked around one more time, and then dropped back into stillness, and awareness, and dreaming.

Harry came out of his trance to find himself kneeling on the floor and Draco shaking his shoulders. He wasn't surprised. He had lost track of his limbs entirely, enveloped in the greatness that was Woodhouse. It would move his arms and legs if it needed them, but otherwise he was no more or less important than the hills and the pebbles and the seed-heads in the grass.

"Harry! What happened?"

It took Harry a moment to respond. He felt settled into his own head once more, but where he could have spoken by means of wind and twitch and leaf-rub a moment ago, now he had to speak with words.

"They've stopped attacking," he said.

He could hear howls through the window, though, and the enraged trumpeting of the karkadann. He stood and led the way through the halls towards the door from the house and thus the outer quadrangle of buildings. Snape and Draco followed, not attempting to prevent him from going. Harry wondered if the very strangeness of the experience had forced them to reconsider their stance towards him. He hoped so.

He knew what he would find when he stepped out into the valley, perhaps the only one who did. He had another example of rage to confront, and another consequence of the course he'd taken.

The werewolves were gathered in a thick clump around the downed winged horses. Harry went to them. Bavaros was the first to notice him, and to jerk his head down in a sharp bow that he'd never given Harry before.

"This is your work, Wild," he said, and there was no question in his voice.

Harry looked at the twisted bodies. They were all Granians, the same swift-flying gray pegasi that had attacked Draco on the Hogwarts Express in September. They lay with twisted legs and wings, barely visible under the tight mesh of grass that covered them. He didn't think he could persuade Woodhouse to let them go any time soon. The land considered that small rushing things were only not a danger when they were still, and it hadn't held these for long enough.

The riders had worn cloaks and hoods, but the hoods were flung back from their faces by the force of their landing. They'd all died choking for air. Harry saw splayed hands that had clawed for it, and the edges of darkened faces and bruised throats and blackened tongues.

They were all corpses. Woodhouse had made them so in the space of just a few minutes, and Harry knew he would have to visit more corpses soon.

"They were from Shield of the Granian," he said, stooping to gently nudge a wooden disk free from the grip of a blade of grass. Since he was part of Woodhouse, the valley didn't object to him taking it. Harry lifted the disk high, to show everyone the flying horse carved on it.

“They struck at us twice before—though I never knew for certain what they wanted. They were working with Unspeakables during the last attack.” He turned the disk over in his hand. “I suspect that we have made fiercer enemies of them, this time,” he added, so softly that he wondered if anyone overheard him.

He had forgotten the keen ears of werewolves. “It doesn’t matter,” Bavaros told him, voice just as fierce. Harry lifted his head in surprise. “They attacked. We saw them come flying in the moments before the air split and they fell and the grass bound them. You said that the valley would defend us, and it did. It’s not your fault that it defended us so well the attackers died.”

Harry looked from amber eye to amber eye. A few did look regretful, as though they would have preferred a lesser cost, but most shone like Bavaros’s, probably reflecting the dominant mood of the packmind. Or packminds; the group included werewolves who had fled to refuge in Woodhouse in the past few days.

Harry remembered what Hawthorn had said. Some other packs, like the one I helped escape, were attacked out of the blue and are frightened and enraged. They need to know that you take this threat seriously.

Woodhouse had shown them that, Harry realized. He could not see a trace of resentment amid the regret. The people here considered Shield of the Granian enemies, no matter what grudges they might have had against Harry, personal or economic, and they were quite pleased with a defense that cost not a single life of theirs. They were pack. They felt every loss like a gaping wound, and they had lost enough people to make them hate the notion of losing another.

Harry had simply not realized that would be quite so strong.

He inclined his head back to Bavaros, slowly, and moved on to the next group of corpses, the ones spilled down the hills and bound with grass and rocks. He did spare a glance for the pine wood, but he doubted he would find any bodies there. The trees had buried the leafless trees—the attackers—quite well. From what Harry could remember, they’d worn dark robes. They might have been more

ordinary wizards with the location of the valley somehow betrayed to them.

They might have been Aurors.

Harry grimaced, and then put the thought away. He'd killed two Aurors a few days ago, or at least been present during their deaths. What he had to worry about now was the living, and those dead he could see. Until he knew for certain they were Aurors, he would not waste time in fear.

The goblins were the largest part of the group clustered around the bottom of the hill. Harry saw why when he drew closer. They stood with their chains blazing white in their hands, facing off against the karkadann, who was snorting and grumbling and swishing her horn back and forth, with an occasional angry shriek to make up for it. Harry frowned and caught Helcas's eye.

The goblin's voice was deep enough that Harry could hear him beneath the karkadann's cries. "She wants to get near and kill him," he said. "There's one still alive. We thought to save him for you."

Harry quickened his pace until he'd reached the karkadann's side. He raised his hand and laid it along her flank.

She planted her forelegs and lashed out with her hind ones. Harry thought it was mostly instinctive. He did manage to duck out of the way in time. But he didn't want her to go on kicking at him, so he sent a small lightning shock into her hide to remind her who he was.

She whirled to face him, and went from enraged to calm in such a short time that Harry blinked. She lowered her head and rubbed him with her horn, which felt cool and slightly scaly. Her snorts had the sound of coaxing to them.

Harry nearly laughed when he realized what she wanted—for him to open the ring of goblins and let her at the living enemy. He stroked her face-fur, still stained with dried blood from the dead Auror, and shook his head. She snorted sadly and flicked her ears forward so

that they half-covered her eyes, looking at him and waiting to see if that would do the trick.

“No,” said Harry, and the karkadann pulled back with a sulky little stamp of her foot. Harry stepped forward, and the goblins let him pass. The karkadann gave a prance. The ring tightened again at once, and Helcas shook his chain so that it made a sound like falling arrows. The karkadann stepped back and tried to pretend it had never been her intention to come forward in the first place.

Harry shook his head and looked at the prisoner. He lay still bound by the grass of the valley, with tendrils trying to writhe their way into his mouth and choke him, and a constant rain of pebbles bombarding his body. Some magic obviously protected him, however, turning the grass back whenever it reached its goal and making the pebbles recoil with sharp pings. He ignored them entirely, staring straight at Harry. His face was pale, his eyes dark and his eyebrows heavy, and the gray hood of an Unspeakable framed them all.

Harry felt a surge of vicious satisfaction, especially when he glanced in several directions and noticed that all the sprawled bodies wore gray cloaks. They had possessed the magic to Apparate here, despite the protections Woodhouse had set up against that, but not enough to actually combat the place magic.

“Your name,” he told the captive Unspeakable.

Scornful silence answered him.

“You realize that you’re a prisoner now?” Harry asked. “That you won’t be able to leave?”

The silence grew more edged. Harry smiled, and knew the smile had edges of its own. “Woodhouse is very patient,” he said. “It won’t give up until it breaks through whatever spells protect you. And the only way that you’ll get any food or water is if we give it to you.”

The man spoke at last, grudgingly, as though speaking was like letting precious diamonds fall from his lips. “You wouldn’t do that. We

know you. The Stone has told us about you. You would not let me starve, no matter what I said or did.”

Harry felt anger trying to rise. There came a poised moment when he nearly shoved it back under the surface of the Occlumency pools and spoke to the man in a hushed, soothing tone, persuading him to see how much better cooperation would be.

And then he remembered what Snape and Draco had said about anger, and he remembered the feeling of the valley’s rage. It had certainly not thought it was doing something wrong. Conceptions of morality had little place in Woodhouse’s thinking. What hurt it was painful and wrong, and protecting any part of itself, no matter what the small rushing things’ motives for hurting it, was right.

Harry had been the one to bond with the place magic and unleash this carnage. On the other hand, he had hardly forced his enemies to attack him—especially the Unspeakables, whose grudge against him he still didn’t know the source of, and Shield of the Granian, who had allied with the Unspeakables for equally unknown reasons.

He had said that he was serious about defending his people. That was the reason he couldn’t get angry, because they depended on him so much.

On the other hand, if they needed him to get angry, needed him to back up an attack like this, and not undermine it, with sheer fury? Would he still refuse, because he was afraid of what might happen?

I will not let them make me afraid.

Even of myself. Especially of myself.

He let the rage seep into his eyes in answer, and remembered what the Unspeakable time-globes had nearly done to Draco on the train, to everyone when they invaded the Ministry, to him during the initial attack in the Atrium. He remembered the Obliviate they’d used on Erica, and the attack on the Maenad Press, and their influence with Scrimgeour.

His magic flared around his body and hissed like a pit of vipers. The Unspeakable lost his composure enough to look briefly startled.

"I've tried to hold back," said Harry softly, "and all that has done is encourage the Ministry to legalize murder, my enemies to think that I'm too soft to punish them, and you to continue with this."

The Unspeakable snorted. "And you believe that I'll be won by that? That I'll fear you?"

Harry tilted his head towards the man's dead comrades without taking his eyes off him. "Will we torture you?" he asked. "No. Will we kill you? If you try to kill us. Will we keep you and get the truth from you? Oh yes."

The Unspeakable only sneered. Harry knew why. Honoria had told him after the attack on Hornblower that those who worked in the Department of Mysteries were immune to Veritaserum.

"Professor Snape," he called, without taking his eyes from the man's face.

Snape strode forward through the goblins, who let him in without question. He stood looking down at the man for a moment. The man looked back, defiantly, and then started and looked away. Harry smiled. It seemed their prisoner had just discovered that Snape was a Legilimens.

"His name is Croaker," said Snape. "And he believes that more of his people will be along to attack you and rescue him shortly."

Harry nodded. "Do you think that you can get more from him, sir, given time?"

"Yes," said Snape softly, and then undid his left sleeve. Croaker was looking at him again now, though he kept his head bowed so that he didn't make eye contact. Snape didn't try for it. He just held the arm out so that Croaker could see his Dark Mark.

Harry saw the Unspeakable's face turn gray, just a bit. He let his own smile bare his teeth, to add to the impression.

Of course I'm not really going to let Snape torture him. But impressions are useful. And if impressions can keep me from having to actually kill or torture someone, I'm all for them. Harry felt a moment of intense regret. If I'd been stronger earlier, perhaps it wouldn't have come to this open war against the Ministry, and we could have found a more peaceful solution.

But he hadn't done that, and it had come to this. Flinching now, in such a way as to put his people in danger, would be the greatest mistake he could make, Harry thought. Forget rage. Forget upsetting someone who would only talk to him. Losing Woodhouse and the lives of everyone in it would do more damage to his people, his cause, and him personally than anything else.

And did he really think that someone else could never forgive him if he lost his temper and said something unfortunate?

Harry took a deep breath. He knew what was happening now. The Occlumency pools had opened one leak, and he had suppressed so many emotions that they were breaking through in a tide now. In one way, it was a good thing. After all, he could see how irrational his former behavior was. And his recovery period had been much shorter than it would have been if he'd done this last year.

But in a few moments, they were going to rise all at once, and that was rather more of a problem.

He snapped his head at Croaker. "Make him talk as soon as you can, Professor Snape," he said, which was a suitably ambiguous command, and turned around, looking at the goblins. "Make sure that the karkadann doesn't kill Croaker on his way to confinement." Helcas nodded. "Don't bother with the other bodies for right now," Harry continued. "Woodhouse will hold them until it's sure that they're no threat. I'll dictate letters later, letters that I hope will go to Shield of the Granian and the Unspeakables and show them how useless this is. Any attack on Woodhouse will only result in more deaths for them. They may be more willing to talk terms now."

He finished in a rush. His head felt flooded with the same silver liquid he envisioned as lying in the Occlumency pools. Emotions sloshed and stirred in him, joy and rage and irritation and gratitude and so many other things that he wondered how he'd gone a few weeks without feeling them.

He asked Woodhouse if it would open a path through nothingness—a way for him to Apparate—to his bedroom. Woodhouse did it without fuss; he was part of it, after all. Harry leaped, and landed lightly on his own bed a moment later.

He took the time to string wards around the room, and then curled up and let his own mistakes catch up with him. He hoped it wouldn't last very long; from the intensity of the coming storm, he suspected it would be short but fierce.

Gratitude was at the forefront, marching like rain, and Harry thought that was only sensible. If it hadn't been for Draco and Snape and Woodhouse, Merlin knows what might have happened to me.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Breakthrough

Harry felt anger sweep around him. Apparently, the flooding emotions had decided to leave him at the mercy of others, and let the anger come back later. He felt it as a vast current, but hovering somewhere in the background, while fear took him first.

He panted, his eyes tightly closed, his body jerking with all the worry, all the terror, all the concern he'd forced himself to suppress in the last few weeks. Images of Connor turning his back on him flashed through his thoughts, and images of Draco killed by Shield of the Granian or the Unspeakables, and thoughts of somehow hurting Snape so badly he never recovered, and what seemed half-memories of werewolves dead and dying, as though he had been at all the attacks on the packs' safe houses himself.

It hurt.

But the fear left him, because other emotions had to take their place. Irritation bit him with sharp teeth, and skittered up and down his arms with scaly feet. How often had he wanted to scowl because someone else was making no sense, or because the Minister refused to move and refused to move, and Scrimgeour didn't see that was just as bad as what his Ministry was doing, in some ways? It made their actions seem as if they occurred under his aegis and with his approval, not independently.

He plunged so suddenly from irritation into lust that he didn't know where one emotion ended and the other began. He caught his breath as his groin tightened and his mouth dried out. He pressed his face into the pillow and tried not to think how much it smelled like Draco. That would make everything worse.

His magic lay along his skin now, warm and purring sweetly. Harry was vaguely surprised it didn't manifest more violently, but then his attention went back to the building heat in his belly and the urge to touch himself. He moaned softly and slid his hand along the pillow instead. The lust wouldn't last, and already he could feel embarrassment stinging his cheeks. He was as close as he had ever come to not caring about that, though.

The magic gave another purr, and Harry realized it wasn't violent because it wanted him to open the wards and let Draco through. Harry laughed weakly, a croaking sound given the absence of moisture in his mouth. "Not a chance," he told it. "It's going to change any moment."

A golden pinwheel whirled across the room and detonated with a long bang on the wall, as his magic began to sulk. Harry had to ignore it. Another wave of heat traveled through him, gripping his muscles and making his hips lift, and Harry closed his eyes and wished it would go away. Merlin, who knew I was suppressing this much of it?

Luckily, it did change then. Odd darts of happiness stung his skin, and he remembered when he had managed to bond with Woodhouse, when he had seen Draco appear, when he had realized that Narcissa Malfoy cared more about her son than she did about her husband. He laughed, and the sound ended in a gasp as the joy leaked away again. He hadn't been suppressing that much of it; some had come through the Occlumency pools as his own grim determination to do even more when he accomplished something.

A pause succeeded the joy. Harry felt the currents that surrounded him swirling and plunging into his body, and he thought he was prepared for the anger.

He wasn't.

Rage burst inside his head like a thunderstorm. Harry pushed his face into the pillow to muffle a scream. He felt flames springing up through his skin, and he could only hope that the wards would help with that. Ordinarily, Woodhouse would lash back at anyone who used too much fire magic here, but he was part of Woodhouse now. Parts of itself were allowed to hurt itself, under Woodhouse's sure and certain conviction that the damage wouldn't last for long.

He lifted his head, and saw his magic stalking the wards, looking for a way out. It had manifested as a Grim, the great black dog the size of a pony, the omen of death that Sirius had so resembled. Harry knew the old legends of Grims. They paced behind people walking home at

night, their breath hot on the back of the walking person's neck. If the victim turned around and saw the Grim, he would die soon.

The Grim faced him. Its eyes were red, more crimson than Voldemort's when he had still had eyes. Harry met them, and felt the Grim's longing as if it were his own, the longing to hunt and tear and rip apart. The people out there had infuriated him. Why should he protect them? He could destroy them. He had the power to do that, and might made right, always.

Harry let out a low whimper. He had assumed that he could control the rage, that he only had to let it fly at the wards and the wards would hold secure. He hadn't realized the Grim would want more than that.

He shuddered, and the anger twisted like a fishhook in his belly, dragging the guts out. Why should he wait? Why should he lock himself up for the good of those who could defend themselves if they knew what was good for them? The Grim was not going to hurt those who hadn't angered Harry. It would administer a bite to some werewolves, a stab to Snape, a snap here and there to Draco...

Harry had to grip and try to reel in the rage again. This time, he didn't mean to tuck it behind Occlumency shields, but he could not let it hurt anyone else.

"No," he whispered.

The Grim's body rippled, and then the magic that made it up vanished into a whirlwind of black sparks. The sparks surged directly at Harry and bit into his face. He cried out, and then the rage and the magic were back inside him, doing pain and inflicting pain and making him see what he suffered when he locked up every bit of anger.

Insults rang in his ears as if they were being spoken for the first time. He felt the same breathless frustration he had when Connor and Draco and Parvati argued and he wanted to tell them to shut up and fuck off. His scar ached from tension, and his teeth hurt from clenching them together.

He managed to bury his mouth in his pillow just before he uttered one long, endless scream of fury that he was sure would have brought someone running to try and break into the room, wards or no. He pounded his fist beside him on the bed, hard enough to tear a wound open on his palm, and growled.

His magic ran shimmering over him in endless flames, not burning the bedcovers because once they were burned they could not resurrect and be targets for its wrath, but simply lapping him with fire again and again. And his clothes had no such protection as the blankets did. A dim part of Harry was aware that burning the blankets might bring him to burn the wooden walls and the windowsill and the other parts of Woodhouse he shouldn't burn. But carrying the flames on himself? He could do that. His clothes vanished into ashes, and then he felt the anger over every inch of his skin.

Why shouldn't he be upset over the obstructions the werewolves put in his way? If George and the others who had been part of the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts really wanted not to be here, they should have stayed in Tullianum and trusted to the Ministry's hospitality. Harry hadn't forced them to come with him. He had told them what they could expect, and they had had the choice. And now they whined and fussed and wanted to go home to a place where they could expect to be killed on sight? Oh, yes, that was much better than what they had here, a place where they were protected and would have Wolfsbane and could learn how to control their lycanthropy around others who had much more practice than they did.

He had done them such a wrong.

And Connor! What in the world was wrong with his brother? Didn't he see that he was falling into the same trap James had, trusting the word of the woman he loved above anything else? He had the example right in front of him! And he was doing it anyway.

And Parvati! Harry snarled through his teeth, and the bedclothes around him once more came close to igniting. But Harry concentrated, and the rage created an image of her face in front of him instead and

then punched it in the teeth, sending it off into a cloud of dissipating sparks.

What right did she have to ask him to spend more time with his brother? If it was something Connor wanted, he should have come and asked Harry himself. He was a big boy, an adult. He could do that.

And then for him to insult his boyfriend, to say that Draco was a Dark wizard and they couldn't trust him—

Harry held out his hand and conjured a sphere of glass in it, the size of the time-globes the Unspeakables had used on him. He threw it at the wall, and listened with satisfaction to the sharp singing of shards. He made another and threw another, and then another, and then another. His magic swept up the shards and danced them in the air, making a maze, a mosaic, of patterns.

He had a right to ask for some consideration. And if Parvati was that afraid of powerful wizards who used Dark magic, she was probably afraid of him right now. He wondered idly if that was why Connor hadn't said anything about her the last few times they'd spoken.

And Draco! The blow of that fury caught him in the stomach and threw him backwards. He claimed to be more mature, and Harry had even thought he was, and then he insulted Connor and Parvati and refused to be quiet and cool and composed under their insults in return—even as he insisted to Harry in their bedroom at night that he was quiet and cool and composed, and what Harry thought were insults were merely truths wrapped in cutting sarcasm.

But he could not be too angry at Draco, because so much of that had been healed when he appeared in Harry's bedroom with the Portkey-bracelet, and that led to thoughts of joy and lust. Harry shied away from those and back into the rage.

Snape was next. Bloody selfish git, what did he want? Harry left him alone, and that wasn't what he wanted. Harry gave him help, and that wasn't what he wanted. He moved Snape out of the house so that Snape wouldn't hurt the werewolves or be bitten, and Snape accused

him of not loving him enough. Harry gritted his teeth to hold back another scream, then decided Why not? and screamed anyway. The sound was satisfying, and the magic ornamented it with a parade of red sparks that broke apart into decorative streams of blood as Harry watched.

Nothing he could do would give Snape what he wanted, and nothing he could do would give other people what they wanted, Harry thought, his mind plunging down in a dizzying spiral. His anger wasn't right. Holding back the anger wasn't right. Rescuing them wasn't right. Leaving them to rot wasn't right. He might think he was committed to making mistakes and learning from them and going on, but how could he when every step was a mistake, including the ones he tried to make with his previous mistakes in mind?

He should have been able to find other solutions to this. He should never have let it come to war. And when the first werewolf murders began, he would have been responsible. He would have been like Scrimgeour, wringing his hands and saying he would win peace in a while and then never doing it. How many werewolves would have to die because he didn't want to kill regular wizards?

Someone like Dionysus Hornblower had more courage than he did, because at least he stood up and spoke what he honestly believed in and didn't feel guilty for fighting back. But Harry was guilty for hurting everyone he'd hurt.

Oh, here comes the self-loathing, Harry thought, as he wrapped an arm around his eyes and let the few tears that would fall. For the most part, the emotion coiled up in his gut as a black ball, too tight to permit any expression but a sore throat and burning eyes. Right on time.

He lay there while he thought through most of his actions and envisioned all the other roads he could have taken. Of course, the roads ran out when he got to the memory of the Midsummer battle; he still did not know what he could have done differently to stop Voldemort from killing those dozen children one way or another.

Not killed them yourself, whispered his conscience. Not have blood on your hands. Or at least made sure that the wards were secure beforehand, and escorted the students down to the lake yourself. That would have made more sense. Why did you never think that Voldemort would attack before Midsummer? You lured him, made him think the date important. He might wait to launch his full forces until then, but there was no reason to think he should wait until the day of the battle to arrive.

He writhed, and made a sound in his throat that was neither whimper nor sob. Then he rolled over on his back, and repeated what he had learned in the Sanctuary, the lessons Vera had drummed into his head until they stuck.

You cannot change the past. You can live for the future and try never to make those mistakes again, but if you once begin to think that you can pay for the past, then you will be paying the price for the rest of your life, until you begin thinking that even breathing is too selfish.

His breathing calmed, and he sighed out, waiting for the next emotion to come. But nothing happened. He lay where he was, a hollowed-out shell, surrounded by the pieces of glass that his magic was still dancing and dandling, and decided that the storm was done. His mind was back in its proper place.

And I'm naked, and the room's a mess, he thought, wiping at his face. Almost certainly my face as well. But I can wash, and the room can be cleaned.

Harry lowered the wards, and called the glass pieces out of existence. After making sure no small glittering shard lingered in the corners for someone else to step on, he walked towards the loo for the third time that day, wincing. His muscles ached as though he'd kicked and lashed—perhaps he had, he didn't remember—and his head was clear but hollow. He hoped that a shower would help him figure out what to do next. At the least, it should soothe the aches and pains.

Then the door opened behind him, and he heard Draco's voice ask, "Harry?"

“You can do nothing to me. I know what your Lord’s like. He won’t permit you to torture someone.”

Snape paid no attention to the ramblings of the man who called himself Croaker as he warded the room where they’d put him. This was one of the smaller studies at Woodhouse, but that made no matter. For what Snape planned, the room did not have to be large.

He did ward the walls against the sound of screams escaping, making sure to speak the incantation aloud so that Croaker could recognize it.

“Do you think that will intimidate me?” Now that the Unspeakable had decided to speak, he seemed to have decided that Gryffindor-like bluster was the appropriate course. “I’ve been through more than you can imagine. I’ve gone through trials to approach the Stone that will make whatever you can do to me look like love taps.”

Snape said nothing. He finished the warding and turned to face Croaker. The man had been stripped of his gray robe, and then his clothing. Snape wanted none of the nasty artifacts that the Unspeakables carried with them to protect Croaker during this. He’d then cast a spell to make sure that Croaker had none of the artifacts embedded into his body, and at last was satisfied.

The nakedness had been a common trick the Dark Lord used when interrogating his prisoners. Hard to feel proud, hard to feel worth something, when all the cloth that protected you from the outer world was stripped away.

“What are you going to do? Do you really want to risk your own Lord throwing you out just because you wanted to fulfill your sadistic Death Eater urges?”

Snape still said nothing. He simply looked at the man.

He knew Harry would not allow him to torture Croaker with pain curses as the fool deserved. And he knew that if he began with such curses, he could keep going, until he hit the edge of Crucio. This man

had tried to kill his son. Snape could have spoken the Avada Kedavra now and succeeded, given his hatred of anyone who tried to do that.

So there were good reasons not to begin the torture.

But Snape didn't have to. He was an excellent actor, and that was what was needed to break Croaker.

"How long have you served the Stone?" he asked, his voice neutral and without inflection.

Croaker laughed. "Long enough to know what you're trying to do. It's not going to work."

Snape raised his wand and intoned another incantation, one he doubted Croaker was familiar with. He was remembering the graveyard at Midwinter, and the vines that had held Harry still so that the Dark Lord and his Thorn Bitch could do what they wanted to him.

The vine formed in the upper right hand corner of the study. It turned its head back and forth, a vegetable snake, and then began to unroll across the floor, heading steadily for Croaker. Its end thinned and sharpened as it came, growing spikes that Snape knew would look like teeth. They were supposed to.

"Have you ever imagined," Snape asked, in the same neutral tone that he'd used before, "what it is like to have something grow through you?"

"You can't frighten me, I told you that," said Croaker.

"It is exquisitely painful, I'm told," said Snape, reaching down and stroking the vine when it came to a stop beside him. The tendril rubbed against his hand. "Imagine being bound down on top of a patch of bamboo. Bamboo grows through anything. And it grows quickly. Imagine it growing through you. Imagine the ends of the stalks sharpened so that it impales you as it grows." He raised an eyebrow, and studied Croaker's face. A slight movement of his left arm, and he brought the Dark Mark into view once more.

"Now, of course, I have no bamboo, and we do not have the time for such a torture, anyway," he said. "I want you able to speak in the end, even if we have to wait for your throat to heal from screaming. But I have something almost as good." He touched his conjured vine again. "This is small, and it will grow."

He leaned forward, holding Croaker eye to eye. "Imagine if it were laid against your face," he whispered.

Croaker said nothing. His skin was pale, and a sheen of sweat had started on his forehead.

"Imagine," Snape whispered, making his voice into the one that he used on the first day of classes to tell his students about the mysteries of Potions, "that it grows as slowly as I tell it to. Imagine that you see the teeth on the end drawing closer and closer to you, inch by inch." He reached down and skimmed his finger across the end of the vine. When he lifted it, he let Croaker see the blood slipping from the small cut. "Quite sharp," he said. "So sharp that you would not feel the cut at first. But you would be waiting for it, every muscle straining, hoping against hope to sense and stop the moment when the integrity of your eye was breached.

"Slowly, slowly, it grows. Imagine it chewing through your cornea, slowly blinding you. Do you know what it would be like, to suddenly lose sight in one eye and not be able to get it back? You would sit there while the vine coiled around your skull, around the eyesocket, growing and growing, chewing and chewing.

"You may think that you would find escape in death, but that is not the case. There are spells that can keep the victim alive through this." Snape flicked his wand, murmuring, "Vita usque." The spell tightened as a silver crown around Croaker's skull, sinking into his hair. Snape smiled. "And now you will be kept.

"The vine crawls into your brain. Imagine the pain depriving you of language, of sight, of memory. The brain is a wondrous and delicate thing, Croaker. Disrupt one connection, and you may be able to think a word and not say it. Disrupt another, and you may be able to have

no sight again even if I heal your eyes when this is done. And the vine, blindly burrowing, going where I tell it to, is merciless. It travels through your brain and comes back.

“Out the other eyesocket, of course. This time, you may feel the teeth chewing from the back of your cornea. Can you imagine the pain you will feel when it severs your optic nerve? Well, you need not imagine it, as you will soon enough be able to feel it for yourself.

“The vine will grow out through your other eye. Then its journey will take it to your cheek, I imagine. It will eat through the skin. I’ll hold it there, because it’s not often that I get to admire the sight of teeth and gums, open to the air through shattered flesh, stained with running blood.

“Then to—yes, your tongue, I imagine. It will shed its seed on the stump of your tongue, because of course I do not need that to remain when you have no intention of speaking aloud. More vines will grow from that and down your throat, the more easily to reach your stomach. Thanks to the Vita usque, you will be alive to enjoy all this, Croaker.

“The pressure on the inside of your body is intense, I’d imagine. The vines were not meant to travel the esophagus, but they will make do. And then they will reach the stomach.” Snape chuckled. “That part, I must admit, I cannot wait for. The human stomach contains a number of potent acids to aid in digestion. I sometimes use distillations of them in my Potions work, though sadly, some of them must be bought on the black market, as international wizarding law frowns on the practice. Imagine what happens if the stomach lining is pierced, and those acids pour through and onto the other organs. Can you imagine? The white-hot end of a sword in the belly would be kinder, I think. It would at least take less time, because with the Vita usque, no one could—“

Croaker screamed.

Snape knew that scream. That was why he had put the wards up, so that no one would hear it and try to interfere. It was the sound of the

defeated, the broken, the sound that said no more, no more, I'll tell you what you want to know, just make it stop, just make the pain stop.

And he had won this with no more than words. Snape was quietly impressed with himself.

Of course, given Croaker's training, there was always the chance that he was pretending. Snape cupped his chin and tilted it up. At his command, the vine coiled around his arm and halted with its razors not that far from Croaker's eye.

The man flinched and sobbed and almost bit, trying to yank away. Snape got a good look into his eyes, though. He had broken. And he was no Occlumens; that much, at least, Snape would have recognized. Most Legilimens could recognize an Occlumens, if not read what was behind his shields.

"You'll tell me what I want to know?" he asked, making his voice disappointed. "Truly? Or must I take an eye?"

Croaker screamed desperately. He had reached that place where one threat was as bad as another, Snape knew. He could have threatened to tie Croaker to a bed and tickle him, and he would have received the same reaction.

"Very good," Snape said softly.

Rufus stepped out of the lift and into the bare corridor that led to the black door that led to the Department of Mysteries.

He had been through the rest of it: the stares of disbelief when he had announced he was invoking the Ritual of Cinnabrum, the bellows that he couldn't do this, the comparisons to a dictator—which he had accepted, of course—and the resignation of several Ministry employees at once. But many others had stayed, and Rufus knew they were already persuading themselves that this was not so bad.

Of course they are, he thought. They were frightened enough to think the anti-werewolf laws were a good idea. At that level of terror, there's not much they won't convince themselves of.

And now he faced the Unspeakables.

He halted in front of the black door and waited for someone to come out to him. No one came. He felt the breathing pulses of the Stone in the back of his mind, and the throb of contained magical artifacts. Those felt more like a toothache than anything else. He couldn't tell what they were or what they did, and if he commanded one of them into life, Merlin only knew what would happen.

Rufus waited, giving permission for someone to use a filing spell and denying an Apparition while he did. The latter irritated him. He supposed that there were some idiots who of course would test his control over the Ministry and think that now that things had so changed, things always forbidden might be possible, but he wished the sensible people outnumbered the idiots.

The door opened at last. An Unspeakable stepped out, clad in the gray robe that covered his face, as usual. He shut the door behind him and stood in front of it. Rufus scrutinized him, but if he was actually bracing himself against the door in a defensive stance, Rufus couldn't tell.

It made his voice sharp. "You know what I've done?" he asked. "The Ritual of Cinnatus has been invoked. Do you know what it means?"

"Of course we do, Minister." The Unspeakable's voice was a blank, bereft of tone or age or gender. It could have been the same voice that had spoken to him in his office, back when he still trusted them. It might not have been. "You control all magic used in the Ministry."

"I do," said Rufus. "And I will categorically deny you the right to use any artifact that I don't understand."

The Unspeakable shuffled a foot. Rufus had no idea if that meant discomfort, or a simple shifting of weight. "There are artifacts we are studying that we must be permitted to use, Minister," he said. "And there are people in the Department whom the artifacts keep warm

and fed and sheltered. They would be uncomfortable if you severed their connections to them.”

“Show me these people,” said Rufus. “Let me see the magical objects that you claim are warming and feeding and sheltering them.”

“Even a Minister who has invoked the Ritual of Cincinnatus cannot enter the Department without the Stone’s permission,” said the Unspeakable.

Rufus suffered a brief spark of shock at the defiance, and then wondered why he was surprised. The Stone must know that he distrusted it and its children, or he would have come to them for help with controlling the Ministry, instead of doing something that would explicitly give him control over the Stone and the artifacts.

“Then have it give me permission,” he said evenly.

“I cannot do that,” said the Unspeakable. “No one tells the Stone what to do.”

“Save me, now,” said Rufus.

The Unspeakable stopped moving. Then he said, “The Stone was very distrustful when it first came here, Minister Scrimgeour, frightened of the enemies of the Ministry. It built traps into its Department, traps that do not depend on magic to work. Poisons and the like.”

“Are you threatening me?” Rufus made sure to keep his voice soft and his hand away from his wand. He had been in situations like this before, facing the criminals and Dark wizards he had chased as an Auror. Make the wrong move, and what was a tense but working moment would dissolve into chaos.

“I am giving you a history lesson, Minister,” said the Unspeakable. “You seemed curious as to why no Minister had entered the Department without the Stone’s permission. And now you know why.”

They've booby-trapped their home ground. Of course they would have. Rufus evened out his breathing, as well as his anger about not being able to accomplish everything he wanted. He bowed to the Unspeakable. "Then I will not disturb the Stone," he said.

"And you will give us permission to use our artifacts?" the Unspeakable asked.

Rufus gave him a smile. He would bet that it startled the man, though the Unspeakable betrayed no emotion, so that might have been only his hope speaking. "Of course not."

"People will die, Minister."

"Which people?"

"People in our care."

"Tell me."

The Unspeakable was silent.

Rufus nodded. "I thought so. I control the magic in the Ministry, sir. You control your home ground, and presumably do so with the Stone's help. What you've forgotten is that I have no reason to trust you any longer." He sharpened his gaze. "I've heard about the attack on Woodhouse. I may be unable to stop you from using the artifacts outside the Ministry, but I can do other things."

"Those things would be, sir?" The Unspeakable's voice remained as featureless as a new snowfall.

"Watch the newspapers," said Rufus, and turned and departed with a sweep of his robes. The Unspeakable watched him go, but made no move to stop him. Of course not, Rufus thought. Any spell he might attempt, any artifact he might throw, owed its functioning to Rufus at the moment.

And if they killed him—

Rufus smiled a smile he knew was wolfish. A Minister dead during the Ritual of Cincinnatus, through no fault of his own and no natural cause, roused the magic's ire. It gained the motive and the ability to avenge itself on the Minister's killers, It would know who they were.

The Department of Mysteries, trapped or not, remained part of the Ministry's physical building. Rufus doubted they wanted to see what would happen when all the power in the building's stones was turned against them.

Besides, they would have to deal with the storm when it broke tomorrow. Rufus was rather looking forward to the storm. It would make people wail again, but there was nothing they could do in the Ministry as long as he controlled the magic there, and at least it would change the balance of power.

Draco had lingered in the corridor until he felt the wards crumple and fall away. He didn't have the strength to break through them—he didn't think anyone in Woodhouse did—and while the silence from behind them unnerved him, he wouldn't let himself think that meant anything bad.

But they were gone, and he opened the door, and saw Harry walking naked towards the loo, as if it were something he did every day. Draco was distantly aware of a cut on Harry's hand that looked as if it were already scabbing over, and of some odd scorch marks on the walls, but he was mostly aware of the fact that he had Harry in the same room with him, entirely naked, for only the second time. And this time, while Harry had suffered, it was nothing like what he had gone through in the Chamber of Secrets.

"Harry?" he called, and realized his voice was husky with arousal. He didn't care. In the moments it took Harry to turn around, he drew his wand and cast a locking spell on the door, one that would sting whoever tried the handle. He was not going to let anyone interrupt this.

Harry at last, slowly, turned to face him. Draco was delighted to see that he had an erection. Harry's skin immediately flushed red absolutely everywhere, but that was only to be expected.

Draco took a step forward.

Harry took a step back.

Draco halted, and made himself wait, difficult as that was to do against the impulses that were urging him to simply take Harry to bed, that said the lust would overcome the fear for both of them. "Harry," he said quietly.

Harry breathed in and out, and that was the loudest sound in the room for long moments. Then he shook his head slightly, and said, "Draco. I ache all over, and my face—" He gestured to it. For the first time, Draco noticed the tracks of tears there. He'd been rather more occupied in looking elsewhere on Harry's body, he had to admit. "I'm a mess. I should shower."

"I think you look fine," Draco whispered. This is perfect. It would be a crime to waste such a perfect opportunity. "Harry, tell me the truth. If I let you shower and run the aches out of your muscles, will you come back and get into bed with me and do what we both want to do?"

Harry swallowed. "I'd lose my nerve," he whispered. "No."

Draco nodded. He felt slightly detached from what was happening, soaring above it, but that was all right. The wind that carried him was dizzying arousal, heat, white-gold lust. He wasn't going to make a mistake. He didn't think there was a mistake he could make, at this juncture.

"Then come to bed with me," he said, and held out his hand.

Harry stared at it. Draco waited. He could see the longing in Harry's eyes, longing that existed. The problem wasn't that Harry didn't want him. But he was afraid of what would happen if he lost control of himself.

Draco decided that he could probably help, as the moments stretched on and Harry still didn't move. He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it over his head. He made the movements casual, without hurry and

without a deliberate slowness that would tease. He suspected Harry wasn't ready to be teased right now.

"What are you doing?" Harry whispered.

"Making your decision easier," Draco said, and laid his shirt on the floor. Then he kicked off his shoes, then his socks, and reached for his trousers. He glanced up to see that Harry's flush had deepened. Draco smiled. It's not all embarrassment this time. "You've said before that you enjoy bringing me pleasure, Harry," he murmured. "Should we start with that?"

"I do," Harry breathed, as though the words had been charmed out of him. "I've missed that."

Draco hid his joy behind a grave nod. He pulled his trousers down, then his pants. He noticed Harry's shoulders fall a little when he did. He did feel more vulnerable when he was naked and I wasn't. Good. This should calm him down, then.

Not to mention make this a hell of a lot easier.

Draco stretched out on the bed and extended his hand once more. He wouldn't force Harry to come to him. He couldn't. He let his gaze, and the evidence of his arousal, and Harry's own, do the work for him.

Harry closed his eyes and whispered, "What am I doing?" But he took a step forward.

"Nothing wrong," Draco said softly. His words seemed to die as soon as he said them. He wondered if it was his imagination that the walls were turning dark blue and purple, and then realized it wasn't; it was Harry's magic. That might be the same thing insuring his voice was quiet. "Something very right. Come here, Harry."

Harry, though still hesitant, came to the foot of the bed and stood looking at Draco for a moment. Draco waited. He could wait. Harry's magic had turned the walls a deep purple, the same color as the ianthinum he remembered from the Room of Requirement when Harry had exercised his emotions in there. Heat moved shimmering

through the room, but it didn't resemble the heat of sunlight that Draco remembered from their earlier encounters; it felt like heat from a jungle, thick and old and—

Wet, Draco thought, before he could stop himself.

Harry took one final deep breath, and climbed onto the bed.

Draco clasped his hand and pulled him forward. He already leaned back against the pillows, and Harry knelt between his spread legs. Draco could feel his cock twitch with the heat, the nearness, of Harry's skin. He was glad that Harry showed no signs of backing off, now. He didn't think he could bear to let him go when he was within touching distance.

He leaned forward and did something he hadn't had the time to do before, kissing Harry gently, then deeply, then more insistently. Halfway through the kiss, Harry began to respond, leaning nearer, uttering a soft, stifled moan, taking his hand out of Draco's so that he could slide it into his hair.

Draco leaned back further. Each movement seemed subtle, as slow as a dance. Harry's elbow poked him in the stomach, and he flinched for a moment, but even that hurt less than he supposed it should. Harry was no longer trembling with fear, but suppressed eagerness. Draco felt gladness sweep through him, joining the rest of the emotions and the deep color of Harry's magic.

Merlin, he felt as if he contained music.

He shifted Harry slightly to the side, or Harry moved; at this point, Draco found it hard to tell. His head was hazy, the world slow. But he noticed it when Harry aligned their groins, and when Harry's chest came to rest against his. That added a sharpness to the heat that ran through him. Draco bucked once, then twice, and saw Harry's mouth open in a gasp he couldn't hear, saw his eyes close.

Draco thought he said something. But then, he was always thinking he said something, and in the press of Harry's magic, it kept being lost. He kissed Harry again, and lifted his hips again. He would do

what he could, but he couldn't move that well, trapped by Harry's weight. It was up to Harry, too.

Harry swallowed, and opened his eyes. Looking steadily into Draco's, he braced his hand and the stump of his left wrist on Draco's shoulders, and then lifted his body and brought it down.

Draco shivered, a full-body shiver that seemed to start with his hips and end up somewhere around his lungs. This time, he definitely said, "Yes," and Harry took that for encouragement—which he bloody well should, Draco thought, somewhere through the fog—and lifted himself to come down again. Draco's hands found their way to his hips and stayed there.

Harry's face shone above him, pink and red, flushed with sweat now, his dark curls dampened with it, his green eyes bright as jungle flowers, but what Draco remembered more than anything else was the feeling of it. Heat and silence and softness and pressure, wound up and around and in and all about them, and now and then he could hear the magic crooning through the silence, a sound like a bird singing faint and far away.

He waited. He rocked between his body's rhythms and Harry's on top of him, but he knew there was a moment coming when he would be able to do something he wanted to do.

And then he knew when it was. His own body told him the time. Draco shifted, locking his legs abruptly into place behind Harry's ankles and thighs, urging him downward faster and harder than he was ready for.

Harry blinked, his face startled for half a second. Then he tilted his head back and gasped out, and Draco knew a moment of intense satisfaction as Harry permitted the pleasure to sweep over him. He could feel him jerking, the wetness splattering his own stomach, and hear Harry's soft intense cries. They were so close Draco could feel the individual muscle spasms, in fact, as Harry allowed his body to do what it wanted, for once, and stopped worrying about what it would mean for his mind and his magic.

It meant a wonderful thing for his magic, as far as Draco was concerned. The skin of heat around them wove tighter and tighter, binding them together into what felt like a cocoon. Harry couldn't stop moving, his hips flexing, and that meant Draco could tilt his own head back and give in just a moment later; he couldn't move that far away, with magic above and below insistently pressing them closer.

He held tight to Harry as pleasure ran through him like water or light, hollowing him out and sating his hunger at the same moment. The warm wetness smeared between them a moment later seemed almost an afterthought; what Draco really felt, more than just wet or warm, was good.

He let his own body move lazily, his hips rising and falling, until the cocoon of magic unbound them and the moment was done. Then he ran his fingers through Harry's hair—he had to do it twice, because it was so slippery with sweat that he lost his first grip—and lifted his head for a kiss.

Harry was smiling. Draco kissed him firmly, rolling them both to the side meanwhile so that Harry lay next to him instead of on top of him. Harry broke the kiss to yawn and stretch his arms over his head.

"Well?" Draco asked, and wondered if he should have waited to speak, given the smugness in his voice. Then he decided that, no, it didn't matter.

"That—" Harry swallowed, and Draco wondered if it was nervousness or simply awareness returning to his eyes. "That felt so good, Draco."

"You won't be so nervous doing it again, then, next time?" Draco stroked Harry's face and cheek and mouth. Harry's magic had drawn back, but Draco could still hear it singing to itself, the sound somewhere between crooning and purring.

"Only because I think it might distract me from other things," said Harry, and smiled again, and then kissed him with unexpected fierceness, driving him back into the pillows. "Thank you, Draco," he whispered into his ear when he finished. "Thank you."

Draco yawned in return and reached for his wand; while he enjoyed the warmth of the wetness on his stomach, it was turning cool and too sticky for his tastes. A wave of the wand, a muttered cleaning charm, and that was gone. Draco didn't want to Vanish the sweat, but—

“Do you still want that shower?” he asked Harry.

Harry didn't answer. When Draco glanced at him, he realized Harry was asleep, his breathing slow and quiet, blending with his magic's purring.

Draco smiled. It was the second time Harry had slept without Consopio since arriving in Woodhouse; the first time had been the night Draco joined him. He wrapped his arms around Harry and pulled them both together, luxuriating in the fact that Harry never woke, so deep and natural was his rest.

That's another reason beyond the pleasure to do this, he thought, as he let his own sated exhaustion run over him in languorous waves. He sleeps well after it. I'll have to remember to remind him of that.

The magic purred. Draco, infinitely pleased with himself, Harry, and the world, drifted off.

Interlude: The Liberator's Fifth Letter

October 10th, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

May I congratulate you on your new and much bolder move? I think the wizarding world will be happier after this, though at first we may have to endure a period of chaos. But that is always the truth. When any storm comes, at first people complain how hard the rain is, and then they accept, when it is done, that the storm watered the grass and made the air clearer and more beautiful.

My family's fortunes are declining, and they are inclined to blame you and Harry vates. I cannot tell you how much this gratifies me. They still speak of Falco Parkinson as a savior, but their voices when they do so are tentative, questioning. They will, before long, abandon him as a bad joke. They must.

Do you know what he has done, Minister? Of course not, because he keeps to the shadows. But my parents have a glass that links them to him, now. This is a treasure of the Order of the Phoenix, passed among the various families and members, and always moved hastily when they think that someone who is not part of the Order might have seen it. That is the reason it was taken from its last hiding place and passed so swiftly to us.

I risked a beating to catch a glimpse of the glass while my mother prattled on and on to my elder sister, but it was worth it. It is indeed what I suspected. It shows the view of the leader of the Order, but they must make a special effort to communicate with him. My parents have not made that effort. They claim that they don't want to disturb Falco in his important work, but I think now that they were always less connected to him than they said they were. He may not even know they exist.

...Forgive the stain on these first words, Minister. My father came into the room to lecture me on duty and threaten again to confine me to a coffin, and I had to fold the letter hastily so that he would not see

what I had written. I nodded meekly and tamely long enough, and he went away.

The glass showed Falco in a misty gray place, weaving images between his fingers. The images were small, but they appeared to me to be werewolves and the full moon. Then he waved his fingers, and the images flew through the air, with Falco flying beside them in his sea eagle form, as if escorting them. He landed at the windows of sleeping wizards and witches. The images slipped into their heads, through their ears.

He is sending dreams, I think. What does it mean that he makes people dream of werewolves? Nothing good.

Please do not be surprised if the resistance to your reforms is stronger than you ever expected it to be. It is not your fault, nor the fault of your reforms' language. Parkinson is inflaming people against you and your plans. Speak about strange dreams, Minister. Work it into a speech, if you can. That might persuade people to listen more to the world outside their heads and less to the one inside it.

My mother will search my room soon, and she may find this letter. I send it to you as-is, sir, and ask for no response, as always.

May we all be unbound.

Yours,

The Liberator.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Ward-Eaters

“Harry!” A hand was shaking his shoulder, and someone was shouting his name, but it was from so very far away. Harry didn’t see why it couldn’t wait a touch, so that he could wade through the rest of the very interesting dream he was having.

“Harry, you have to see this!”

That woke him, at least. Harry opened his eyes, and blinked. He didn’t remember taking off his glasses before he and Draco had had sex yesterday, but he must have, because everything in front of him was a blur, including the white object Draco was trying to show him. “What?” he asked. His voice trailed off into a sleepy yawn.

Draco shoved his glasses onto his face, and then held up the paper in front of him. Harry rubbed at his eyes to remove the last traces of sleep-dust, and leaned close to see what he could see in the Daily Prophet.

The headline shocked him speechless. When he didn’t respond in enough time to content Draco, he began bouncing up and down on the bed behind the newspaper, saying, “Harry!”

“I saw,” Harry whispered. “I’m just not sure if I can believe. This is real? This isn’t some trick of Hornblower and his Vox Populi?”

Draco made a rude noise. “That’s printed on coarser paper, and the newsprint isn’t as even,” he said, as if those were things that Harry should have noticed for himself. “He can’t afford the best like the Daily Prophet can, no matter how rich he is.”

Harry shrugged. He honestly hadn’t noticed. As long as he could read the newspaper, he tended to care about what was on the page, not its consistency or the quality of the printing.

There was certainly nothing wrong with the screaming headline that stood up and called out a turning point in their battle before him.

ANTI-WEREWOLF LAWS REPEALED

Minister Calls Them 'Archaic,' Announces A New Way

By: Melinda Honeywhistle

The article wasn't that complimentary to Scrimgeour—most of Honeywhistle's articles weren't—but Harry got the gist of it. The Minister had summoned the Wizengamot and told them what he thought of the anti-werewolf laws, how they damaged the noble cause of peaceful relations between wizards and werewolves, and how he wanted them to think long and hard about the laws and whether there was a one of them they would really want to keep.

The Wizengamot had voted thirty-one to twenty to repeal the existing laws. They were drafting new ones to deal with the situation, and expected to remain in seclusion until they'd finished.

Honeywhistle concluded the article with a sulky suggestion that the Wizengamot was dominated and controlled by the Minister. "Their compliance is to be perhaps expected," was the last sentence, "given that Minister Scrimgeour now controls all magic used inside the Ministry."

Harry had no doubt that was part of it, but the Wizengamot Elders could leave the building and vote elsewhere—and they would have done so if it was something as simple as Scrimgeour telling them to vote the way he wanted because he was temporary dictator of the Ministry. No, Scrimgeour had done something else, but Harry was damned if he could figure out what.

"Does that mean the rebellion is done with?" Draco whispered. "Does that mean that we can go back to Hogwarts?"

Harry looked up at him. "Do you want to?"

Draco's face convulsed in irritation at once. "I want to be wherever you are, idiot," he said. He leaned down and kissed Harry so hard that Harry was gasping and dizzy when he pulled back. "So I can do that," Draco finished. "I simply wondered if the rebellion was done, now that you got what you wanted."

Harry caught his breath and licked his lips and tried to think about something other than the smooth, bare expanse of Draco's shoulders, and what he would see between his legs if he moved the newspaper. "No," he said. "The Minister is drafting new laws, but no one has any idea what those laws will be yet. They might be less restrictive but still not grant werewolves the rights of full citizens. And there's no word of what might happen with the goblins and the centaurs and other magical creatures. So we'll stay here until we have those gestures of good faith—either actual laws or binding oaths—that we asked for."

Draco nodded. "Woodhouse will protect us," he said, and kissed Harry insistently once more. The paper crinkled between them, and he started to shift it out of the way. Harry might have protested, but he was remembering exactly how Draco had made him feel yesterday, and he wanted to feel like that again.

Someone pounded on the door.

Harry heard Draco's locking spell undone, and barely had enough time to spread the Daily Prophet over them both when Snape stepped into the room. He knew him by the firmness of his left step and the slightly dragging nature of his right, and the sweep and snap of his robes, before he ever saw his face.

There was a pause. There was a very long pause. Harry, lying with his head on Draco's shoulder and most of his face under the paper, felt Draco shaking with silent laughter against him. He wished he could laugh. His flush was all embarrassment and not lust now, at the thought of Snape catching them.

Finally, Snape's voice said, in the depths of freezing cold that he usually reserved for when a seventh-year-student made a mistake that he should have corrected in first year, "You must come to the kitchen. We are having a strategy meeting."

"So were we," said Draco innocently.

Snape's response was to shut the door with a massive slam. Draco rolled off Harry and laughed, and went on laughing even when Harry

hit him on his shoulder, which should have hurt since he had no clothes on.

“That didn’t even make sense,” Harry told him. “That joke, I mean. What do you mean, a strategy meeting?”

“It didn’t have to make sense,” Draco said, rolling over and smiling at him. “What was important was that he saw he couldn’t intimidate us. There are times I think he’d want to roll you up in bicorn fur and prevent you from moving for the rest of your life, Harry. He has to learn that you’re an adult now, and that includes having sex.” He started to kiss Harry again.

“A strategy meeting in the kitchen, he said,” Harry reminded him, and rolled out of bed. His embarrassment had reduced his lust to ashes.

“You should shower first,” Draco said. “You’re all over sweat. And we could share.”

Harry performed a quick cleaning charm on both himself and Draco, listening to Draco’s yelp as it roughly scrubbed his skin with some satisfaction, and then summoned a new set of clothes from his trunk to him. “You’ll have to get dressed, too,” he added, keeping his back turned to Draco. “I don’t think you’d want anyone else in the kitchen to see your strategy.”

Harry stepped into the kitchen, and blinked. Among the faces he’d expected around the round table were a few unfamiliar ones.

“Neville?” he asked in astonishment.

“Harry.” Neville, holding a pot in which a small, spiky plant grew, beamed in pleasure and something Harry recognized a moment later as nervousness. He wasn’t sure he’d be welcome. He gave a quick little motion somewhere between a nod and a bow, and held out the pot. “This is one of the plants I was breeding to counter Yaxley’s magic-binding vines.”

Harry accepted the pot and stared at the plant inside. This close, he could see that it was mostly dark green, but had crimson spots here

and there, and the spines were thorns, thick and furred at the ends. He shuddered and shook his head, shutting off the awful memories that wanted to rise.

“What does it do?” he asked Neville.

“It’ll react to the presence of the vines,” Neville said. He nodded to the thorns that curled around the plant’s stem, his nervousness fading as he talked. “It grows a lot deeper; the roots extend down like the coils of entrails, you see, so they’re much bigger than they appear at first, folded again and again. Those shoot straight out, and they bear thorns of their own. Those claw the vines apart.”

“This is wonderful, Neville,” Harry murmured, setting the pot aside. “And you’re welcome to stay here, if you’d like.” He was uncertain. Neville might only have come to turn over the plant. Of course, he could have sent it with an owl if that was the case.

Neville stood straighter, and inclined his head in a small, formal bow that Harry recognized after a moment. Light purebloods used it as a token of pledging loyalty, if not formal allegiance, to a Lord-level wizard. “I was hoping that you would say that, Harry,” he said.

Harry nodded back, and turned around again, towards a face he’d only seen a glimpse of before Neville distracted him. “And Ginny?”

Ginny beamed at him. “Yes.”

“Why?” Neville might have used his errand as an excuse, but Harry couldn’t imagine what Ginny could have told her family that would have permitted her to come. Her parents had been upset with her, or so Connor had told him, even for fighting in the Midsummer battle, where they really couldn’t spare anyone from the field. They had thought her too young, or not a good enough fighter, or—this was Connor’s opinion—their baby girl. She could have been a sixth-year and they would have still objected to her fighting in a way that they didn’t to Ron or the twins doing so.

“Because I was tired of being useless.” Ginny lifted her head and glared at him as if she wanted to intimidate him. Harry wondered if he

was the only one who noticed that her lower lip was trembling; like Neville, she'd been uncertain of her welcome. "No one knows what to think in Hogwarts, everyone changes their opinion daily, and there's just too little firm ground. I wanted to come here and help any way I can. I may not be able to fight like a fully-trained wizard, but my mum taught me other things."

Harry nodded. "And did your family say you could?"

Ginny flushed to match her hair.

Harry sighed. "I'm not looking forward to the Howlers," he murmured. "But you're fifteen, and you fought last year, and it's true that I do need people who want to help." Many of the werewolves didn't really want to help; they wanted to complain. Now that he was allowing himself to feel angry again, Harry was aware of a steadily rising irritation with that. What had happened to those afflicted with Loki's bite was horrible, but could he help it if they refused to make the best of a bad situation and instead would rather lie about lamenting? "So if you still want to stay, you can."

Ginny smiled and clasped her hands. "Thank you, Harry," she said. If she heard Draco's mutter about weasels, she ignored it. Harry reached back and slapped Draco's shoulder without turning from the gathering in front of him. He had noticed two other new faces now.

"I think I met you briefly at the alliance gathering in the spring," he told the young man who stood next to Millicent. "But I don't remember your name, sad to say."

The man smiled. "My name is Pierre Delacour," he said, with only a slight accent to his English. "And this is my cousin Adrienne." He nodded to the slight young woman at his shoulder, whom Harry had had trouble seeing. He squinted, and now he could see her fully, including the slight shimmer of a silver cloud that seemed to cover her magic. He felt his hackles rise.

"Why is she wearing a web?" he demanded.

Adrienne laughed and gave a curtsy; the robes she wore were more like gowns than robes, Harry noticed. “I am full Veela,” she said, in an accent that sounded more Spanish than French to Harry. “I drink a potion so men will not notice me so much. It is entirely willing, I assure you.” She had long silvery hair and blue eyes—features Harry remembered from Fleur at the Triwizard Tournament, and from the Veela at the Quidditch World Cup. She wore a ring on the hand she held out to Harry. Harry clasped her hand and kissed the back of it, studying the ring. It was heavy, with what looked like silver layered on top of silver, surrounding a square stone that was flat and blue and had the gloss of metal.

“What does this mean?” he asked.

“I am an official representative of the Veela Council,” said Adrienne, with another smile. “I come to see if you are a good option for alliance. You are vates, and we must look at you.”

Harry nodded. “And you came for the same reason?” he asked, turning to Pierre.

Pierre smiled, and Millicent flushed. “Not entirely,” Pierre said softly. “There is more than one kind of alliance to be made here.”

Harry let it go, though he could tell some of his allies were puzzled about what that meant. It wasn’t their problem to worry about.

“We’re having a strategy meeting,” he said, “because of the headline this morning. I assume that most of you saw it?”

Some heads shook, so Harry cast an Accio for the nearest Prophet, and heard someone yelp as it tore out of her robe pocket. Harry shrugged an apology and spread the paper out so that everyone could see the headline.

An immediate babble of voices started. Harry let it continue, at least until he heard someone saying, “We can go home.”

“Not yet,” he said. The voices cut off as if an axe had fallen. Harry didn’t know if that was a good thing or not. “We don’t know what new

laws the Wizengamot will come up with. That could include granting werewolves the same rights as wizards, but we don't know that for sure. And that does nothing for the goblins—" he inclined his head to Helcas, who stood on the other side of the table and listened "—or the centaurs." Only Bone was in the room, but he brought a hoof down in a solid stamp when Harry looked at him. "The only thing we know is that the new laws will presumably be less restrictive."

"We can go home, though," George said, leaning forward across the table. Harry restrained his groan. George was the most vocal of the new werewolves, always asking when they could go home, hinting that he wouldn't have any trouble fitting back into the wizarding world—ignoring the fact that most people would know he'd worked for the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts, and would know what it meant that he'd survived Loki's attack—and saying that he knew spells to keep his lycanthropy concealed.

"There is one danger you have not considered," said Snape, and his voice silenced George quite effectively. The werewolf turned around and gaped at him. Harry looked at Snape, wary.

"What is that, sir?" he asked.

Snape nodded several times, as if to say that the due of respect Harry accorded to him was acceptable if not quite what he wanted, and said, "I questioned our Unspeakable prisoner, Croaker, yesterday. I wanted to make sure he was holding nothing back, and after some time, he did tell me what I wanted." Harry masked a shiver. Snape's blank face and tone said nothing about whatever methods he'd used to get that information out of Croaker—but then, Harry had told him, basically, that he had a free hand. "The Unspeakables wanted werewolves in Tullianum for easy access to them, because they were indeed conducting experiments with your kind." Harry hoped he was the only one who noticed the sneer on the last words, but given the expression that appeared on Camellia's face, he suspected he wasn't.

"What kind of experiments?" Remus leaned over the table to challenge, and Harry wanted to bury his head in his arms and groan. Did Remus always have to take the most exasperating course?

“Why, experiments to see if they could duplicate the werewolf curse in some respects,” said Snape, his eyes glinting. “However, they know lycanthropy has its drawbacks. What they wanted was the ability to change a person into other animals, on other dates than the full moon, without the vulnerability to silver—and to control the transformation for themselves, rather than having a wolf within the person’s body control it. Imagine a world in which the Unspeakables strike from afar, turning an enemy into a great cat and having him attack and kill someone else, then revealing him as an unregistered Animagus all along. With their ability to Obliviate others and control a person’s mind, they could have the wizard himself believing it. And such cases do occasionally happen. Who would question it?”

“And what would happen to those people who were already Animagi?” Harry asked, sick at the thought.

“Why, the Unspeakables would want to control those transformations as well, of course.” Snape’s face was a blank. “There is much they would give to be able to do that, and as long as they are giving the lives and magic of werewolves, they are paying no price themselves.”

“What are they doing to the werewolves they took into the Department?” Harry was not sure he wanted to hear, but he was sure he couldn’t afford not to.

Snape gave a piercing glance—to Harry’s surprise, it was in Ginny’s and Neville’s directions, as if he thought they were the ones who should not hear this, rather than the werewolves themselves. Then he turned back to Harry. “Taking them apart is the delicate way of saying it, Harry.”

Harry stifled a rush of sickness, and nodded. “And why did the Stone aim them at me in particular?”

Snape shook his head. “Because you are a champion of werewolves. Because your magic is very strong, and they thought your character and the fact you had not Declared for a Lord made you vulnerable.” He steepled his fingers. “Croaker told me something fascinating, something I never knew. When a Lord Declares for Light or Dark, the power of Light or Dark wraps that wizard and protects him. It is not a

conscious thing. As we have seen, the wild Dark may still be angry at the Dark Lord. But it makes them safer from attempts to mentally control them. This may be because Lords usually use compulsion themselves.” He leaned forward, hands flat on the table now. “They considered you a prize, Harry.”

Harry snorted. “Many people do.” He paused. “Did you uncover any information about why they might have allied with Shield of the Granian?”

“The Granian breeders do fear that you will try to take their horses, and thus their source of profit, from them,” Snape said. “So they intended to destroy you or capture Draco as a bargaining chip, if they could. The Unspeakables talked them out of killing you, and sent them after you to reach you in places they could not.”

“And do they actually have webs on their horses?” Harry asked.

“Croaker was not interested in that, and did not bother to find out.”

“If they do, then I’ll ask them to break them sooner or later.” Harry drummed his fingers on the table. “A separate offer of peace to them might not go amiss. Pointing out that the only people of theirs who have died are the ones who have attacked me would do, and telling them what I do with webs is imperative. If the horses aren’t sentient, and they don’t use webs, then all I can really do is ask for better treatment, not break them free.” He turned to Narcissa. “Do you know anyone connected to Shield of the Granian, Narcissa? Anyone who would be willing to carry a message to them for us, and do it without distorting its content?”

Narcissa frowned slightly. “It is years since I was friends with the women connected to those families,” she murmured. “But it may be that it is time to renew old acquaintances.”

Harry nodded. “Do what you can. I don’t consider that a particularly urgent matter unless they attack again. I think they may have learned their lesson, while the Unspeakables will keep coming because of the Stone.” He looked back at Snape. “Did you find out what the Stone wants?”

“New magic,” said Snape. “It is an experimenting intelligence, apparently. It wants to learn and know new things, and to make new things. It does not care what it must sacrifice in order to do so.”

“Just like all my other enemies,” Harry murmured, and smiled in spite of himself. “And it wants to use me as a source of fuel?”

“Yes.”

“At least it’s more honest than Dumbledore wanting to use me as a savior for the world,” Harry muttered, and this time sought out Ignifer. He hadn’t heard any reports from Honoria in the past few days—obsessed as he had been with working on the werewolf cure and trying to keep his emotions in check, he hadn’t made much time for those of his people outside the valley—but she would have come to Ignifer, or told her if anything unusual had occurred. “What is happening with the Maenad Press, Ignifer?”

She frowned. “Hornblower is already swinging from supporting you whole-heartedly to questioning your decisions,” she said. “Some of the articles appearing in the Populi have called you a murderer, and insisted that you be tried for your part in killing ‘those fine Aurors, Unspeakables, and independent wizards who tried to stem the bloody tide,’ to quote one of them.”

Harry nodded, and decided that he could feel all the guilt about that he wanted, but later. “The situation is delicate, then,” he said. “And no matter what Scrimgeour’s intentions, we can’t count on the repeal of the anti-werewolf laws bringing in much support. To some people I’m a murderer, and they’ll remember that no matter what happens legally. We do need to settle the rebellion if we can, show that we can compromise if possible, but not at the cost of everything we’ve worked for.”

“Does this mean that you won’t allow yourself to be taken and dragged off to prison?” Remus asked abruptly.

Harry faced him and arched an eyebrow, wondering what was going through his head. “Of course not. I may ask for sacrifices from myself

that I would not from anyone else, because I know that I can pay them, and I may pay those sacrifices the other side asks if they seem reasonable. But I won't give up as I would have last year, especially not to avoid violence. I chose violence when I started on this course."

Remus lapsed into silence. Harry studied him and wondered if he could talk with him later, work out what was bothering him, and why in the world he had asked that bloody question.

Then he snorted to himself. Oh, yes, I'll add arguing with Remus to my list of other essential things that need to be done. At this point, I'll have to wait until he comes to me and actually demands my attention. I can't waste time chasing down people who don't want to talk.

"Given that the Unspeakables want werewolves so badly, we can't end the rebellion yet, end of the anti-werewolf laws or not," he said, ignoring the sounds of dismay from George and the others who supported him. "The Unspeakables are still part of the Ministry, and even Scrimgeour controlling all the magic in the building doesn't help much when they attack outside it, as we've seen. Will he risk open conflict with the Department of Mysteries? If he will, then I think we can trust him to back us. Otherwise, we'll continue to wait."

Someone else started to ask something, and then the karkadann bugled from outside. Harry caught his breath against the tide of battle-lust that swept his blood, and told him it was probably nothing, just an unusual maneuver by a centaur that she didn't like. Woodhouse would have warned him if attackers were near.

Then she screamed again, and this time it was a cry of pain, and Harry's uncertainty whispered, If anyone could get through the place magic, it would be the Unspeakables.

He asked Woodhouse if he could Apparate outside, and received permission in seconds. He leaped, and then he was standing in the grass, near the place where the broken corpses of the winged horses still lay, clutched and held by Woodhouse's defenses, and staring at the gray-cloaked ranks who had appeared on the nearest hill.

They were holding spheres of intense white light, and the karkadann was charging them. One of the spheres flickered as Harry watched, and a burst of white flew at her. It carved a bloody trail down her back. She stopped, screaming and tossing her horn in rage, and then ran on again.

Harry knew how they must have passed Woodhouse's defenses then. The last time, what had triggered Woodhouse's response was hostile intent towards Harry himself, who was part of it, and its trees and grass, also part of it. If the Unspeakables had brought weapons that would only harm the living things not part of Woodhouse and no hostile intent towards Harry himself, then the place magic wouldn't rouse. It was the same situation the Death Eaters had been in last year when Harry and his group attacked them, since none of them had bonded to the valley.

He wondered if any of the Unspeakables realized what would happen now.

Probably not, he told himself, or they wouldn't have done this.

And his magic unfolded its wings.

Indigena snatched her hand back from the page of the book as if it'd burned her. It took her a moment to realize that it hadn't been a surge of magic from the ancient leather that had hurt her. Her thorns were vibrating from the surge of power from the west and south, as Harry's magic roared full-throated.

Indigena blinked at nothing for a moment. She wondered that she should so easily distinguish Harry's magic from Falco's, and she worried that her dedication to her Lord might be fading if she could.

But then she realized there was a simple explanation for that, and smiled. Harry's magic had a sharp, dark edge from its indebtedness to Voldemort's. Falco stank to her. Voldemort's magic smelled like fresh, deep earth, damp with the smell of rain. Harry's magic bore the scent of fresh, damp earth that someone had not made the best use of in attempting to plant too many flowers at once.

There was nothing she could do to influence the battle, since nothing she could do would let her leave her Lord's side. He would be unhappy even to hear about the battle, unless it ended with Harry wounded. She silently wished Harry good luck instead, and then turned another page and bent over the beginning of Chapter 13. Since he already has the compulsion gift, I doubt that this will be useful to him.

Harry could have done a number of things, he supposed. He could have flung fire at the Unspeakables, and they would have roasted; he didn't think they had artifacts that would protect them against all attacks. He could have chosen something uncommon, like lightning or acid. He could have called on the karkadann and sent her charging at them; she was already running straight towards them again, despite the spheres of white light in their hands and the wound on her back.

Harry didn't see a reason to do any of those things, though. He simply opened his absorbere gift and began swallowing the magic from their artifacts, and from their bodies, and from their wands, and from anything else they might carry on their persons. He felt none of the reluctance to do this that usually plagued him, only a grand disgust that their constant attacks had made this necessary at all.

One sphere and then another went dark, and Unspeakables gave the low, pained screams of wizards who had suddenly become Muggles. Harry snarled in his throat, and turned towards the ones who had wounded the karkadann—and did it again as he watched, with what looked like a sword but shot darts that made her scream and rear as they caught her in the forelegs.

Then another held up something dark and mottled gray. Harry could see it weirdly well from that distance, which he shouldn't have been able to.

His absorbere gift hit it and ended. Harry let out a loud gasp, and nearly lost control of the magic he had gathered. It felt like being punched in the teeth.

He watched, narrow-eyed, as the mottled gray thing twisted in the Unspeakable's hands and reared out a slender neck, dragon-shaped, with a blocky dragon head on the end. It roared, and the sound traveled up into the air as an almost visible cone of pure force. Harry followed it, and saw one of the wards still hanging over the valley crackle like burning paper and disappear.

I should have wondered about that, he thought. I only hung the wards to make the werewolves feel safe, but they should have warned me when someone approached, even if Woodhouse didn't.

He focused on the ward-eater the Unspeakable carried, and wondered what it was made of and what to do with it. He was sucking magic from the rest of the Unspeakables, still, but he was approaching the full amount he could carry—they simply had so many artifacts, and defensive spells, and small surprises sewn into the pockets of their robes—and when the ward-eater roared in his direction, he lost control briefly and staggered to his knees, panting harshly.

"What can we do, Wild?"

Harry glanced up. Camellia stood at his side. He wasn't surprised she had come first of all of them. Her eyes were brilliant, but she looked at the wizards with understandable frustration. Born Muggle, this wasn't the kind of battle she could participate in.

Unless.

Harry held out his hand. "Take my hand," he said. His voice was weird, distorted, as if he were underwater, from all the power he carried, but Camellia clasped his wrist with utter trust. Harry pulled, and she knelt in the grass beside him. Harry stared into her eyes, and still saw nothing but trust there.

"Can you carry some of the magic for me?" he asked.

"I—yes." Camellia blinked. "Though I don't see how I can hope to contain it, Wild."

“I’m going to try something,” said Harry, and ignored another scream from the karkadann. She wasn’t dead yet, he thought he would know if she was, and the ward-eater would block most of what he could do, and he was going mad under the pressure of the magic racing around him. He moved their joined hands so that his palm rested on Camellia’s shoulder, and closed his eyes.

He called on his will, and the magic he had gathered, glad to be useful, surged to the surface of his skin.

Camellia gasped, but made no sound of protest or pain as the magic flooded into her. Harry set it to carving out a magical core in her. That was what wizards had that separated them from Muggles—a reservoir to carry and hold the power. Most Muggles could be affected by spells, but trying to use a wand was impossible, because the wand simply had nothing to connect with in them.

Harry used some of the magic to create a core. It was a strange process. With his eyes closed, he could see flashing purple veins and green ones, as if he were plunging into the midst of a jeweled tunnel. With his eyes open, he just saw Camellia’s face, anxious but not in pain.

The magic reached the bottom of its dive and spun out. Harry could swear he saw a spider-like creature for a moment, its legs and its mandibles working incredibly fast, creating a net of spun silk across the bottom of the new core. That insured the magic wouldn’t run away as fast as it gathered. Then the spider tightened its hold and began climbing back up the side of Camellia’s—stomach? Harry had no idea where the physical analogue of the magical core would be, in her—weaving as it went. Tighter and tighter grew the strands of the net.

The rest of the magic poured in.

Harry felt the growing sentience in it, inevitable when it was as tightly confined in so small a place as this was. The personality was rather different from any he’d encountered before. Of course, he had extremely limited experience with this kind of thing; the magic he’d encountered in Woodhouse and the magic he’d peeled off from himself to give to Elfrida Bulstrode were the only ones that truly

counted. The magic he'd drained from Black artifacts to restore those children rendered Squibs by Voldemort's attack hadn't forged this intimate a connection between him and the person he gave it to.

This magic was cool, confident, and deeply protective. It would tend to bury its uncertainty in action, and right now it was looking forward to hurting its enemies. Harry wasn't that dumb, so he realized a moment later that it was shaping itself after Camellia; it was her magic now, so it acted with and resembled her.

He sensed just when enough would be too much, when the magic would destroy Camellia instead of help her, and he pulled back, severing the connection with them by tugging his hand from her shoulder. Camellia stared at him with a dazed expression.

"You can help me," said Harry softly. "I've given you the absorbere ability."

Camellia swallowed and glanced up at the Unspeakables on the hillside. The ones with the other weapons had fallen back by now, doubtless seeing they'd only exhaust themselves against Harry, and win no victories. The one with the ward-eater was advancing, holding it out. "How do I use it?"

Harry gave her an encouraging smile. "Imagine a mouth opening in front of you. That mouth is going to pull on the magic of the Unspeakable, and only the Unspeakable. You'll be swallowing the magic."

"But what controls it?" Camellia's voice had got smaller. "I never—a few wizards have told me that magic feels like exercising an extra set of muscles. I don't know which direction to move in."

"In this case, it mostly depends on what you want to happen," said Harry. "Free will. I know you have a strong one. The magic should do as you like."

Camellia nodded tentatively, and then focused on the wizard in front of her. A moment later, the Unspeakable staggered. Harry shook his

head. The absorbere ability felt like a buzzing along his skin, the irritated tickling of ants' legs.

"What are you going to do?" Camellia called, as Harry reached out.

"Pull at the ward-eater itself," said Harry, focusing on the block of gray material. He thought it was rock, but it didn't matter what it was. "From behind."

He leaped, and Apparated up the hill. He heard someone shout, but the Unspeakable was engaged with Camellia and couldn't turn in time.

Harry drank.

The magic that came flooding towards him was more alien than anything he'd felt so far. He caught a glimpse of a mind tight-wound with glittering, alien threads, with existence so long that the concept of quickness, of engaging with others rather than watching them, filled it with anger. It was angry that it had been forced to respond so quickly to this situation. It would have preferred to observe, as it always did, and make its changes so slowly that the humans could not see them.

It would have done all that, but now the moment had arrived when it needed to change or cease to exist, it thought, and so it had moved to change. It could disrupt the magic around it if it must, though it had been reluctant to show its ability forth. Its servants had always kept secret the fact that it was its immunity to magic, and not its magic itself, that was the most important facet of it.

Harry reeled a little as he was thrown back into his own head. The ward-eater was a piece of the Stone.

He didn't think that he could drain it, now that he knew. The Stone's immunity to magic included his absorbere ability.

But he could make it retreat from the battlefield, by making its servants useless to it. The Stone needed wizards, those who could understand magic in a way that Muggles simply couldn't, and who belonged in the Ministry and the wizarding world in a way that

Muggles weren't considered to. He reached out again to the Unspeakables up the hill, tearing their magic apart and sending it sliding off into the air in splashes when he couldn't swallow it.

The Stone, or the ward-eater, let out a wail of loss through the dragon-head. Harry was simply inflicting losses too heavy; Harry could feel that, through the tentative bond that connected them now. Few served the Stone in comparison to the overall numbers of the wizarding population, and it had already lost too many of them pursuing this one target, tempting though he was with all the magic he possessed.

The Stone called. Harry felt it pulling on bonds joining the Unspeakables, not unlike those bonds that linked the packmind. The Unspeakables Apparated if they still could, or grabbed the arms of those comrades who could and went along. Harry felt the urge to do so himself, before he shook his head and severed the bond that bound them.

He could feel the Stone snarl in the moment before he did so. It knew that he knew it, and it was wary now. Harry could almost feel thoughts that, in something human, he would have called We might need to have peace after all.

And then they were gone, and Harry stood blinking on the hill, and the karkadann ran around in nothingness screaming in frustration, and Camellia was staggering up the slope towards him, laughing and sobbing.

"That was—thank you," she said, and then collapsed on his neck and started crying.

Harry held her as much as he could; he was missing a hand and stood a few inches shorter than she was. He stroked her back, and murmured in her ear, "I know I didn't warn you. If it hurt, I'll take it back."

Camellia withdrew at once, shaking her head, her eyes too bright, but not only with tears. "No," she whispered. "I—I understand why they

screamed, now, the ones you took this from. There's no way that I could give this up."

Harry nodded, then held out his hand and whistled for the karkadann. She came trotting to him, kicking hard enough that clods of dirt and grass flew out of the ground. When she crashed to a halt beside him, she gave him a look so expressive that Harry had to chuckle. Two battles now, and she hadn't been able to kill anyone.

He patted her side, standing on his toes, and she obligingly knelt so that he could look at the wound on her back. To his relief, it was already scabbing. Karkadanns did have magic that would let them heal faster than most, he supposed; the violence they did to each other and to other animals of their homelands demanded it. He touched her shoulder once more, and she bounced back to her feet with another snort and a final kick before she started grazing on the grass where the Unspeakables had stood.

"It's going to make trouble, isn't it?" Camellia asked hesitantly. "I mean, making me a witch, but giving me that gift, too?"

"I expect it is," said Harry, turning around. "But I've won more than I've lost. I know what the Unspeakables are doing, now, and how their Stone thinks. And now that they've attacked a second time, when the Ministry's already announced a changed attitude towards werewolves, either the Ministry is going to have to admit to hypocrisy or distance itself from the Department of Mysteries."

"Which do you think is more likely?" Camellia asked, as they moved back towards the ground.

Harry grinned at her. He felt wild and light and reckless, his emotions blowing through him like wind. He felt like a karkadann. "I have no idea."

Chapter Thirty-Five: Fathers and Heirs

Indigena crouched over her Lord and closed her eyes, her hands vibrating with the convulsions of his body. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, and was not sure who she was apologizing to: her Lord, or herself, or whatever was causing this and shaking her Lord like a terrier with a rag.

The convulsions had begun not long after Indigena felt Harry’s magic rising in the west. Her Lord had screamed, the sound echoing in the confined space of the tunnel. Indigena had crawled to him and tried to ask him what was wrong, but he had been unable to answer, only crying out again in a great voice. Indigena had done what she could to keep him from swallowing his tongue, from vague memories that that was what one did in the middle of a seize, and she had tried to cast binding spells, but they broke. She almost considered that a hopeful sign—her Lord might be recovering his magic—but she could not tell, and after that there was only screaming and thrashing.

She murmured reassurances and stroked his face. The skin felt cold and scaly under her fingers, and the scent of earth was strong around her. But then, they were underground. Indigena shook her head. She had almost lost her sense of smell, or at least lost her ability to tell the difference between magic and ordinary soil.

She murmured to him again, and then Voldemort’s back arched, and he uttered a thin whistling sound too horrible for a scream. Indigena shuddered, her eyes fastened to his face, wondering what in the world was happening, and what in the world she could do about it.

Then something moved in the upper corner of their tunnel.

Indigena looked up. The flicker of movement repeated itself, and for a moment she caught a glimpse of bright colors, fever-bright, splintering on themselves like a rainbow in a pool of water broken by a careless step.

Then the movement faded, and didn’t repeat, but at least her Lord slumped down again and took a deep breath into his lungs.

Indigena shook her head and smoothed her hands down his sides. He was too thin, his ribs standing out against his pale skin like dry sticks. She knew that he could not die; he had told her as much. But the thought of suffering what he did just in order to remain alive made her feel a deep pity for him.

Rufus looked up with a faint frown as the owl came winging in through the window. He recognized her at once, of course; there couldn't be many even among snowy owls who had the obvious intelligence in their golden eyes that Harry's Hedwig did. She landed on his desk and held out her talon to him with a demanding air.

Rufus took the letter from her leg. It was in an envelope, and the seal was one he hadn't seen before: a circle of stars backed by a crescent moon and a rising sun. Of course, it had to be the seal of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow; that would fit, and who else would be using Harry's owl to send their letters?

He opened the letter.

October 10th, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

Several things have happened at Woodhouse in the last hour, and you deserve to know all of them. First, the Unspeakables attacked us again. I believe there were twenty of them this time, and they managed to slide around the wards that I'd constructed using various weapons of their own.

The most important of those weapons was a piece of the Stone. It ate the wards and managed to deflect my own magic-eating abilities. When my mind brushed against it—I believe a temporary connection was initiated because I tried to drink magic directly from it and could not—I learned why.

The Stone is immune to magic, Minister. I am almost sure that you do not have as much control over it as you think you do.

It saw that it was losing its servants to me, and while the Stone may not care enough for its Unspeakables to avoid sacrificing them, it cared enough that it knew simply throwing them at me would cause it to lose. It retreated, and took the Unspeakables with it, by pulling on bonds in their minds. If you do not see now that the Department of Mysteries is a danger to the Ministry as a whole, with its highest loyalties to itself and not the ideals of justice and law, I am not sure what proof will convince you. I am glad that you have managed to repeal the anti-werewolf laws, but I am not sure what will take their places.

Please make sure there are laws specifically forbidding experimentation on werewolves and their magic, even by the Department of Mysteries. We have questioned an Unspeakable prisoner we captured in the attack yesterday, and he said that that is the reason they wanted werewolves caught alive and imprisoned in Tullianum: they remove them into the Department and use them. They are trying to figure out a way to impose controllable transformations—controllable by themselves, of course—on others, and to do it in such a way that the newly-transformed wizards are immune to silver and can change at times other than the full moon. Their research would almost surely enable them to control Animagi, as well, if it's completed.

They wanted to use me as a source of fuel, since I am Lord-level and yet not Declared. Apparently, Declaration carries protections against such a thing.

Also, you deserve to know what happened in the battle. Once I discovered the Stone could resist my ability to eat magic, I knew I needed help. Next to me in battle at that moment was a Muggle werewolf, one member of a pack I lead. I managed to give her a magical core and the ability to eat magic as well, passing it on from the power I'd swallowed. She helped me to drive away the Unspeakable holding the piece of the Stone. This proves, of course, that the conclusions of the Grand Unified Theory are much likelier to be close to reality than the pureblood prejudice favored for so many generations.

I hope that you can use your information usefully, Minister.

Sincerely,

Harry.

Rufus felt the world crash down around his ears.

He was almost sure that Harry did not see all the implications, if Muggles were able to have magic. There would be no justification for keeping their worlds apart anymore. The most important part of themselves, the part in which most wizards invested their identities, would be common after all, contagious as a disease. The Muggleborns had embraced the Grand Unified Theory; Rufus could not think of anyone who would embrace this. Even some Squibs would balk if they found out they could become wizards, but Muggles could, too.

And there was, of course, the question of whether people would join Harry for personal gain or loyalty, and what they would do if he was able to make them stronger than they already were. With the absorbere ability, they could become more powerful on their own. They could use that gift in ways that Rufus thought Harry never would. The wizarding world might, as a worst-case scenario, rip itself apart in an orgy of draining, and then a few strong wizards would emerge at the top. It would make the Ministry's careful work and the long cultivation of laws that could both accommodate average wizards and leave some loopholes for the Lord-levels useless.

And making a werewolf that strong! What was Harry thinking? What if she decided to take vengeance for the persecution of her people in the last few months?

And where would the magic that Harry intended to give others come from? It must be drained. He could get it from objects, but he had come to the point where he would swallow his enemies' magic without hesitation. Would becoming Harry's enemy merit an automatic descent into Squibhood? What about becoming the enemy of one of his friends?

Rufus caught his plunging thoughts and tied them back with reins. They reared and stamped and snorted, but at least he wasn't losing his head over fear, which had been his first reaction. He could think and breathe again.

He must not lose his mind to fear. That was what the Wizengamot had done, and that was the reason Rufus had found it so easy to convince them to repeal the anti-werewolf laws. Fifteen of them already thought they had voted for him to complete the Ritual of Cincinnatus, and Griselda knew she had. Sixteen, plus the seventeenth of Rufus himself, made a third of the Elders, and that was enough to swing wavering neutral parties, or those who were so susceptible to threats that the strongest, closest one could change their minds. Thirteen others had come to them because of that; they were more afraid of Rufus and his power over the magic in the Ministry than they were of the werewolves.

Rufus had grimaced as he worked on them, but he already knew they were cowardly, weak-willed enough not to resist the implementation of a little fear. The Unspeakables and Loki the pack leader had made them dance like puppets. He couldn't count on them to hold strong or listen to rational argument. He could only make use of them for what they were. And he had.

They were in seclusion until they finished considering the anti-werewolf laws. But the Minister could interrupt them.

I will have to, Rufus thought, as he gazed down at Harry's letter.

He didn't know if Harry realized it, but in one stroke, he had won his rebellion. They could not risk what would happen if Harry decided to take this particular weapon onto the battlefield. They could not risk wizards growing like toadstools. They could not risk the other countries who had agreed to the International Statute of Secrecy descending on them. The decision to reveal wizards to the Muggle world was not Britain's alone.

Harry was a breaker of boundaries, an unweaver of webs. Rufus was not sure he would care about that. And even if he did, even if he

probably would, there would be others, other absorberes he could make, who would not.

He stood, gripping the letter firmly in one hand, and made his way to Courtroom Ten. He planned to share all the information in the letter with the Elders, including the parts about the Department of Mysteries. Once they found out what the Unspeakables had wanted, Rufus thought he could count on a few more of them to swing to his side. Juniper, for one, would not like to find out that he had been used by wizards interested only in experimenting with werewolf magic. He felt lycanthropy was a curse, full stop, and should be left the hell alone. He even looked on efforts to develop Wolfsbane with stolid disapproval.

Rufus could see it now. He would propose an alliance of the baffled, outraged, and newly enlightened Ministry with Harry against the Unspeakables. They had not known. Now they did. And how much of the inflamed prejudice against werewolves could be tracked to that source? The Department of Mysteries was a convenient scapegoat. They would take the blame for the hatred and the fear that other people had actually felt. Rufus already knew what lies he would spin.

It was not pretty. It was no prettier than the Unbreakable Vows he had made his allies swear in Courtroom Ten, no prettier than the lies they had to tell to safeguard what had really happened there.

But if Rufus wanted to look pretty, he would have gone into war wizardry, not politics. Let his hands get dirty. At least it meant that others' wouldn't have to.

Draco contained his outrage through the announcement Harry made of Camellia's new powers, through the frenzied celebration by her pack, through Harry happily answering all the questions everyone else had about this, and through Thomas Rhangnara's incessant chattering at Camellia.

"But what does it feel like?" Rhangnara pressed her.

Camellia, her cheeks flushed, a smile Draco thought was far too smug for some witch-come-lately on her face, simply shook her head.

"You have magic yourself," she said. "You must know what it feels like."

"But not the absorbere ability." Rhangnara made a note on the scroll he was carrying nonetheless. "And what's the difference between what you were like and the way you are now? I know some research wizards say that being a Muggle or a Squib is like being deaf, dumb, and blind, but we've never been Muggles or Squibs, so how do we know?" He looked at Camellia's left ear, as if to see if it had changed shape.

"It is not," said Camellia, sounding offended. They were sitting in the kitchen, with Camellia in the place of honor at the table's head, draped by werewolves. Rhangnara sat next to her, earnestly scribbling down her every word. Harry lounged in a chair halfway down the table, smiling. Draco wanted to punch him. "My sight is a little clearer now and the world seems a bit more wonderful, that's all."

Draco would have wagered every Knut he had left to him that she was lying. Being a wizard was much better than being a Squib or a Muggle. One only had to listen to the screams of those Harry drained of their magic to know that.

Rhangnara asked a few more questions, all of them as petty and useless as the first. Snape had left long since, stepping out of the room as if he would strike someone should he stay. Draco understood perfectly how he felt. The whole world had just gone merrily tumbling downhill, and no one else in the room acted as if they knew that.

Finally, finally, he managed to snag Harry and drag him aside, when everyone was involved in listening to the battle from Camellia's perspective yet again. Draco cast a privacy ward around them.

Harry smiled at him. "Some tactics you wanted to share?"

It took Draco a moment to remember back to their conversation of this morning. He forced a smile. Harry picked up on his mood almost

at once, and stood straight, his own grin vanishing. "What's the matter?"

"Why her," Draco said, the words the only ones that would emerge from his tight throat, "and not me?" He was imagining what could have been, if Harry had expanded his own magical core, or given him the absorbere gift. They would have been equals. His father would have had no trouble confirming him as magical heir. Draco would have a separate standing in the eyes of the wizards who followed Harry—not his lover, not the only one who could handle Harry when he was on the verge of explosion, but someone with unique and powerful gifts of his own.

Harry blinked. "Because you never asked," he said.

Draco gave him a little shake. "I didn't know it was possible."

Harry shrugged. "Neither did I, until today. And then Camellia was the one beside me, not anyone else. If someone else had been, I would have tried the same desperate tactic." He searched Draco's face. "Do you really think I would have refused you that magic?" he asked softly. "Why?"

Thrown on the rocks like that, Draco couldn't answer the question, couldn't say why the gesture to Camellia—a result of chance, to hear Harry tell it—felt so much like a slap in the face and a rejection of most of what they'd shared. He ground his teeth for a moment, and then said, "Because if anyone is going to receive something that special from you, it should be me."

"Of course, if you want it," said Harry. "I think I could trust you not to misuse it. I do trust Camellia, because she's loyal to me as alpha and has to know that if she abused the gift, I would take it away in an instant. And her magic is quite average otherwise; I had to use most of the power carving out her core and then making sure it wouldn't drain as soon as I poured magic into it. And I wouldn't trust Snape with this right now, nor Remus." He tilted his head at Draco. "I trust that you wouldn't drain Connor, or Parvati?"

Draco felt his hands shake. He hid it by cupping Harry's chin and tilting his face up. "No," he whispered. "Never. It would be a temptation, of course, but just having them know that I could would be enough to content me. I'd keep my drawing to objects and enemies, like you do."

His mind was reeling, but it oriented now around the concept that he might possess this same gift himself. Yes, the wizarding world in general would be upset, but he could have it. He could finally cease to feel as if he were lesser than Harry in any way. Granted, his driving ambition for some time had not been to have magic equal to Harry's, but the old longing wasn't as buried as he'd thought.

"You were never lesser to me," Harry murmured.

Draco started. "You used Legilimency?" he asked Harry, who was staring directly into his eyes.

Harry shook his head. "I didn't have to. Your thoughts were screaming out your happiness." He stroked Draco's shoulder for a moment. "You do realize that, right? My magic is what makes me able to be vates and a war-leader, but it doesn't separate us in any fundamental way. I've never felt that I was better than you because I'm more magically powerful, Draco, I swear it. It would be like—it would be like saying someone is better than someone else because they have more money or a bigger house. Magic's just a tool, Draco, just what allows me to do what matters to me, like unbinding webs and protecting others. That's all."

Draco stared at him. Twice in several moments his world had broken into pieces, but this was a revelation about Harry, not about how the wizarding world in general would react to Harry's ability to make Muggles into wizards or witches.

He really doesn't think that his magic makes him any different than the rest of us. He really doesn't.

No wonder he makes a terrible Lord. To be a good one, you have to have some sense of the gulf that kind of magic opens between you and everyone else. Voldemort has it. Dumbledore had it. But Harry

just sees it like his having an extra limb, or a pair of wings, or a talent for music.

Draco wondered if he should laugh or cry. He wondered if he should try to explain it to Harry. But he was almost sure the last project was doomed to failure. Harry had seen people bow to him and thank him with tears of gratitude in their eyes, and still he thought they were comfortable with the gestures or grateful for their freedom. Draco could tell him how most people would consider him, how they thought of most Lords, but Harry would only blink and make some connection with how that encouraged people to remain under webs.

He doesn't think himself above others. I doubt he ever will. He makes mistakes, but it comes from things like not knowing how the wizarding world will react to this, not because he thinks he has the right to make decisions that others don't.

Draco decided he wouldn't explain. He just shook his head helplessly, and said, "Now I know it, Harry." He held out his hand, and added, with a tone of wistfulness in his voice he couldn't mask, "Now, can you give me the ability to eat magic, please?"

"You sound like you're asking for a sweet," said Harry in some amusement, but he reached out to clasp Draco's hand. "I'm still carrying some of the extra magic from the battle," he said. "The absorbere ability wants to digest it, but I don't need to be any stronger than I already am. And if I need to, I can drain some of the Black objects that I brought along."

Draco opened his mouth to object to this squandering of Harry's inheritance, and then closed it again. Harry saw what use those objects could be, first, and he obviously thought that sitting around and decorating rooms was not enough of a use.

He closed his eyes as he felt magic begin to move up his arm like a lance of melodic acid.

Indigena was dozing when her Lord erupted in screaming and thrashing again. She tried to catch his shoulders, but his head flew up and knocked her in the face instead. She heard the distinct crunch of

her nose breaking, but the flowers and stems under her skin shifted to repair it quickly enough.

She was more concerned with Voldemort, whose convulsions brought his head dangerously close to cracking open on the hard earth wall of their retreat. She turned to the plants she had rooted in one corner of the tunnel and called for help, and they came, unfolding tendrils that erupted into soft pink flowers as they reached her. Indigena was sure that Voldemort would be horrified if he awakened and saw himself cradled on swift-roses, but at the moment she didn't really care. The petals would help pillow his head, and that was all she wanted.

As the flowers pressed themselves into position, Indigena smiled in spite of herself, in spite of her worry and fear. They obeyed her because they loved her. She did not have to carry tendrils beneath her skin or spend every waking moment with them to have a special bond with them now. Indigena thought everyone should have such love in their lives. It might teach someone like her Lord to care about more than the conquering of the next enemy.

Her attention switched back as a long cut opened on Voldemort's chest. Indigena shook her head, and lowered her right arm so that some of the aloe-like plant that grew under her fingers might heal it. The cut began to scab over as soon as she touched it, which was a common thing with magic-inflicted wounds.

Who could be magically powerful enough to reach through my barriers and hurt him from this distance, though?

The only answers that came to mind were Harry and Falco. Indigena thought she would recognize the smell of Falco's magic, and if Harry knew where her Lord was, surely he would be here already.

She gently shifted Voldemort's hands to the side as more cuts appeared on his shoulders. The hands were clasped around a golden cup with badgers for handles and would not let go. That didn't matter. What mattered was that she be able to reach and tend the wounds, wherever they appeared.

A loud hiss made her look up. For a moment, she thought it was a snake, not unreasonably drawn to her Lord, but she could see nothing. She could feel a presence, however, stirring around her Lord like a wind, prowling and snarling. Its temperament was wild and vicious.

It paid no attention to her. One more pace, one more whirl, and then it shot through a hole in the dirt roof. Indigena shrugged, waited to see if it would affect what was happening to her Lord at all, and then returned to tending him.

Not long after the strange presence had left, however, her Lord ceased to convulse. Indigena sighed in relief and reached for Odi et Amo again, keeping a careful eye on Voldemort. No more wounds appeared, and his hands were creeping like spiders along the sides of the cup again, usually a good sign. He stroked the cup and murmured to it when he was in one of his midway-moods. On the very best days, he could talk with her and tell her of his plans, but Indigena would take this over screaming and thrashing, or the deep silence that sometimes afflicted him, when she had to lean over him to hear his breath.

She stroked his shoulder absently as she read the book. The scaly, snake-like skin had ceased to feel strange to her when she was transformed so thoroughly. Now it simply felt like dry dirt against her fingers—bereft of nourishment, but not unpleasant.

She would never leave him. The debt was a constricting chain, but it meant nothing without the honor behind it, the honor that her nephew hadn't had. She would stay with the Dark Lord and make up the Yaxley pride the best way she knew how.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He winced when pain resounded through his body like a leaping child yelling for sweets.

"What do you feel now?" an eager voice asked from the side. Harry managed to turn his head a little, and saw Thomas sitting in the chair next to his bed, leaning forward. The scroll he'd written on while questioning Camellia dangled from his hands, and he was asking questions so fast that Harry doubted he'd notice when it slipped to the

floor. "Do you think that you could say why that didn't work? Would you say the transfer of magic to another feels more like giving birth, or more like handing over a gift? Could you do it to someone whose wand was broken? What about someone born magical and then drained? Could you—"

"Enough, Rhangnara."

That was Snape's voice, so tense and quiet and cold that even Thomas blinked and shut his mouth, though more in surprise than fear, Harry thought. He managed to roll his head over and look up at Snape, eyes watering. He couldn't tell if that was from the light or the pain.

"Sir," he said, trying to sit up. There were still instincts in his head that protested the thought of being flat on his back in front of Snape. Snape murmured something, however, and an invisible band formed above Harry, gripping his chest and holding him down. He frowned at Snape, and considered shouting, but with Thomas there, he didn't like to.

"You should not move far or fast," said Snape, as if that were self-evident. "When you tried to transfer your absorbere gift to Draco, something happened. You both began screaming in pain—"

"Is Draco all right?" Harry attempted to sit up again. He had assumed that Snape would have said something at once if Draco was hurt, but perhaps he wouldn't, not if he wanted Harry to remain in bed.

Snape tightened the invisible band with nothing so much as a flicker on his face. "Draco is well," he said. "Asleep, after watching by your bed until I made him rest. He experienced a short trance of pain, and then recovered from it." He leaned towards Harry. "You, however, went into convulsions."

That would explain the muscle aches, Harry had to concede. "Well, I'm not now," he said. "Let me up."

He released some anger into his voice, as a sop to Snape. His guardian went on speaking as if he hadn't heard him. "And then powerful magic surrounded you and spread away from you in a web."

Harry blinked. "A web?"

Snape held out a Pensieve towards him—his own, Harry saw after a moment. "I have preserved the memory here."

"I want to see it again, too," said Thomas, and pushed his head forward and into the silvery liquid before anyone could stop him. Harry rolled his eyes and pushed his head in beside Thomas's.

He winced to see Draco flailing and rolling on the floor, and it took him a moment to tear his eyes away and see what Snape had been talking about. A web, glittering as if made of dew and light, did extend away from his shoulders, spreading out into the air in a regular pattern.

And it led straight from him to Camellia, unless one counted a single white thread that trailed forlornly away from his back into the air.

Harry watched as Camellia also began to shake, with a sick feeling in his stomach. I acted too quickly again. I didn't consider the consequences. I can't believe that I keep doing this.

The white web contracted, rippling, as dark magic started to pass along it and through it. Harry squinted, and thought he could see the ripples as black serpents, sidewinding around the strands of the web until they reached Camellia. Then they bit her, and she screamed. It took Harry another moment to recognize the noise. It was the same one that wizards gave when they became Muggles.

The snakes turned around and rolled back to him holding something white in their mouths. They spat it like venom at the flailing Harry in the image, and his back arched so hard that Harry wondered if he hadn't cracked his spine. Then two of the snakes climbed along the white thread that extended from his back, fading as they went further and further. By the time they reached the outer wall, they had vanished entirely.

Camellia gave a strangled sob. Thomas-in-the-memory knelt down next to her, talking softly. Camellia shook her head, and Thomas assumed a sorrowful expression and put his hand on her shoulder. The memory ended then, as Snape turned towards Harry and scooped him up into his arms with ruthless precision.

Harry pulled his head out of the Pensieve, and shook it. "Camellia lost her magic," he whispered.

"Yes," Thomas confirmed, patting him on the shoulder. "She'll be all right, though. It was a shock, but lycanthrope physiology really does give them an amazing amount of strength, you know. She's sleeping right now, but we talked, and she says that she thinks she'll recover. Did you know that the werewolf curse might have started because people wanted to be stronger? There's some interesting research coming out of America, of all places, that suggests—"

"Rhangnara," said Snape, in that protective snarl again, and Thomas blinked and focused on Harry.

"Right," he said. "I think you're a unique occurrence, Harry. You could only create the magical core and transfer the absorbere gift in the first place because you're half a magical heir."

Harry blinked, and said intelligently, "What?"

"You're Voldemort's magical heir," said Thomas, genuinely not noticing Snape's reaction to the name, Harry thought. "But the transfer of gifts and power isn't complete. It began that night that he attacked you, but it didn't end, the way it should have. Most transfers between magical ancestor and heir, well, complete themselves. Either the magical ancestor dies and the gifts achieve full strength in the heir, or the ancestor makes the choice to pass along the gifts before their death. But that usually leaves him or her without magic, and they die anyway." Harry nodded, thinking of Elfrida's choice to send her power on to Marian despite the fact that it would mean her death, because her daughter's best chance to be a magical heir was right after birth. "The transfer between you and Voldemort was interrupted as it was made, because the reflected Killing Curse hit

him and his spirit vanished, taking the gifts with him.” Thomas spread his hands. “It stretches out between you like a tunnel. Down that tunnel comes magic. I think it can wash back and forth between you. Didn’t you say once that his absorbere ability changed after the resurrection ritual?”

Snape hissed, and turned on Harry. “You told him that?” he demanded.

Harry ignored him. He had told Thomas that shortly after Thomas came to the valley, during the time when Snape couldn’t seem to care whether he found another guardian or not. What Harry did during that time was his own lookout. “Yes, it did,” he said. “He had it before the night when he came and attacked my brother and me, but not as strongly. He could drain someone, but it left him weak for days afterwards. When he resurrected, his ability had improved. And our dream connection changed, too,” he added. “I used to be able to act in the visions. Then, I wasn’t able to do so.”

Thomas nodded excitedly. “The situation is unusual, but not impossible,” he said. “After all, the transfer happened in the first place. The prophecy saw to that. Because the prophecy is taking so long to be fulfilled, I think that helps. The tunnel between you depends on the connection between your souls, and it depends on the prophecy. You amplified the magic and practiced with it during a time when he was still bodiless and powerless to use it. Then, when he came back to life, he could draw on that greater experience, and become a more powerful absorbere.”

“But when I gave it to Camellia—” Harry said.

“I don’t think you could have done that at all if Voldemort wasn’t incapacitated right now,” said Thomas. “He doesn’t have the ability to use the absorbere gift, so it goes back to drifting in the tunnel between you. You use it when you draw on it, but you could also give part of it to someone else.”

“Then why did it leave her at all?” Harry could hear Snape’s teeth grinding. He ignored him. He wasn’t responsible to Snape, and Thomas was the only one in Woodhouse who understood this

transfer of magic and could help him right now. "We should have been able to share it."

"Because you tried to give it to Draco, as well," said Thomas quietly. "The gift resented being stretched so far. It snapped back together, and took itself away from Camellia as it did so—along with the magic that you'd transferred to her. I think she may still have her core, and so she's a Squib, technically, instead of a Muggle, but she has no magic."

"Did the magic go back to Voldemort?" Harry asked. The one thing he would not be able to forgive himself for out of this was if he had accidentally strengthened his enemy.

"I don't think so," said Thomas. "The magic's greatest desire is to be used, and he could not use it right now. I think it retreated into the tunnel between the two of you. It's very strange, though," he added, with a slight frown. "The tunnel still counts as confinement for the magic, and it remains trapped, unable to return to the magical ancestor or bind fully to the magical heir. I would have expected it to grow intelligence, as magic so often does when confined, and to be fairly upset about this."

Harry froze. "I think it may have," he said.

Thomas just frowned at him, but Snape understood, since Harry had told him about this at the Sanctuary. "The bird," he said.

"What?" Thomas asked.

"There's a bird that's appeared from time to time," said Harry, wondering why he couldn't have seen this before. The bird's crimson eyes had even been the color of Voldemort's, at least before he lost them. "It's made of pure magic, and only I can see it. It comes through all the wards in Hogwarts and Woodhouse and the Sanctuary. It talked of being bound to me and resenting it, and being bound to 'him' and resenting it. It regularly scratches me." He hesitated, then drew up his pyjama top and showed the bird's claw-marks on his chest, the most recent wounds, to Thomas.

Thomas leaned forward and stared at the wounds in fascination. "I've never heard of magic doing that," he murmured. "I can see it wanting to kill you, or kill Voldemort, so that the tunnel would end and it could go to one of you or the other. But perhaps that's impossible, given that Voldemort cannot die and you're bound to him by the prophecy unfulfilled. It's doing the best it can. I still don't know what to make of the scratches, though."

"Do you think I could still give magic to Camellia?" Harry asked. "If I tried not to pass on the absorbere ability?" He ignored Snape's scowl.

Thomas shook his head. "It would be shaky," he said. "The magic might grow bored and resentful and decide to take itself away at any moment. From the way you describe it, it hates you. It would do something like that just to spite you, I think, and that could overcome its longing to be used."

Harry nodded, mind still half on the bird. He knew he had felt the viciousness it carried before. Now, he knew where. In the graveyard on the Midsummer day he'd lost his hand, when Voldemort's magic had returned to him as he'd returned to his body. It had unfolded great wings made of blades and cried aloud, and Harry had felt how evil it was, how much hatred it had. For everything.

It's shared between us. It's confined. That would only make it more vicious.

And he was heir to that bladed magic, and it didn't like him. Harry suppressed a shudder.

"This is so much to absorb," Thomas was murmuring. "There are a few places it links into the Grand Unified Theory, but in others there are gaps." He leaned forward and fixed Harry with an earnest stare. "Would you mind if I studied you, Harry, and the connection between you and Voldemort? Perhaps waited for the bird to appear again? Perhaps—"

"You are not studying my son."

Snape said nothing more than that. He just stood at the end of Harry's bed like a rock wall, and Thomas shut his mouth again. This time, though, he gave a faint smile and climbed to his feet.

"I understand," he said. "I suppose I wouldn't want someone studying Rose, either, and deciding to prod at her magic and mine and tell me how it worked." His tone said that he was dubious about that and how much he wouldn't like it, though. He bowed to Harry. "I hope that you rest well and recover, Harry."

He turned and departed before Harry could speak again. When he could, he snapped the invisible bond that held him down by sheer force of will and sat up, glaring at Snape. "What right did you have to do that?" he asked in a hiss. "If studying this bond can help me defeat Voldemort, then I say we should try it."

"You are my son." Snape didn't move. "You deserve more than to become an experiment for a research wizard."

"Thomas didn't mean any harm—"

"I am sure Rhangnara did not." Snape sneered. "But that kind of attitude will do you no good either, Harry. He would push you to exhaustion, or into danger. Has it occurred to you that there has been danger already, from your misguided gesture of good will? This could influence the bond between you and Voldemort, strengthening him or drawing his attention."

"Thomas didn't think it would." Harry wished he could swing his feet to the floor. He was shaky with pain and remembered pain, though, and he wouldn't be as tall as Snape anyway. He tilted his head back, and tried to look as if he were unconscious of his shortness compared to Snape. "He said that the magic wouldn't go back to Voldemort, because he couldn't use it."

"Has it occurred to you that he may not be right, given that this is entirely new?" Snape's voice had a familiar sound to it, as if he'd been suppressing generations of fury. "His guesses are at best guesses."

“Has it occurred to you,” said Harry, his voice as low and hard as he could make it, “that I still don’t trust you in the duties of guardian?”

“Name me one who will perform them more faithfully,” said Snape. “I will step aside for him at once. Or her.”

“That’s not the point!” Harry resisted the urge to grind his teeth together, but just barely. “I became used to not having a guardian in the past few months. I admit that you helped me with the Occlumency pools, and that was a mistake I made. Giving magic to Camellia might be another. But I don’t need someone hovering over me so protectively that we miss valuable opportunities to learn new information!”

“When the information is conditional on your life and your magic,” said Snape, moving no muscle except the ones in his jaw, “then I consider it part of my business, Harry.”

“Why?” Harry wished words could set the bedroom on fire by themselves. He had to restrain his magic from joining in and trying to grant his wish.

“Because I care for you,” said Snape. “And because whether or not you are my ward, you are my son.” He reached out and smoothed Harry’s hair back from his brow, baring the lightning bolt scar. “This is not all you are,” he said. “I will not allow it to become all you are.”

Harry dropped his eyes in defeat. He wanted to argue, but he didn’t know how to do it without damaging the fragile bond between him and Snape even further. And he did want a parent, a guardian.

He just didn’t know if it could be Snape, given what he had done in the past few months, given what he might do again if he didn’t continue to work on his healing with Joseph.

Wait.

Harry lifted his head. Normally, he disdained making bargains like this anymore, but he and Snape had fallen back several steps. And trying to pretend everything was all right wasn’t going to make it so.

“Can I ask you something?” he said. Snape nodded, and Harry continued, “Have you spoken to Joseph since you’ve been here?”

Snape’s lips thinned, which Harry thought was as good as an admission. He nodded, his eyes not wavering from his guardian’s face. “Then please do that. That way, I’ll know that you’re taking time for your own healing, and not just mine, and that you are serious about this. I know that I’m your son to you, sir, but during these last few months, I started seeing myself as your guardian.”

“No one asked you to fill that role,” Snape said harshly.

Harry blinked. “Of course not. But it was the only kind of bond with you I could have.”

Snape glared at him, wordless. Harry pressed on. “I did get used to having a parent, sir. I want one again.” I think. Harry thought of parents rather as he did of comrades in battle; they were pleasant and sometimes necessary to have, but depending too much on them could cripple him in those moments when he would need to move alone. “But I can’t trust you until I’m sure that you’re not using me as a distraction from your own problems. And if you’re not healing any further, you might fall apart at any moment, and take me with you. I’ve already explained why that can’t happen.” He held Snape’s eyes. “Please, sir. Continue your talks with Joseph. In return, I’ll try to be as good a son as I can.”

Snape thought about that. Harry waited. He could almost see the protests forming in Snape’s mind, and dying one by one. Yes, they had reached a stage of their relationship where they shouldn’t need bargains like this, but their relationship was no longer the same as it had been four months ago. That meant they needed this.

Or, at least, they needed the willingness to work on this from both sides.

After a few moments, Snape inclined his head. Harry sighed out. “Thank you, sir. Now, I’ll go find Draco—”

“He is still asleep,” Snape said. “I have set an alarm to let me know when he wakes. And you, Harry, took more damage than you know in your convulsions. You need to rest.”

Harry gave him a tolerant glance, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. “It’s not that bad, sir—“

He staggered. Snape lifted him with Mobilicorpus and settled him back into bed before Harry could object. Then he took his glasses.

“Sir,” said Harry, with sternness that failed somewhat as the warmth of the pillows and blankets soaked into his consciousness. His legs already felt as if they were made of stone. He yawned. “You cast a sleeping spell,” he accused Snape, his words coming out slurred.

“Merely one to make the bed more comfortable,” Snape murmured. “It is your own exhaustion doing the work, Harry.”

Harry mumbled something incoherent. Fog crept over his awareness, and despite a few thoughts of checking on Draco and Camellia, his breathing evened out. His mind staged a last, pitched battle against the darkness before sleep managed to overcome him entirely.

Snape stood gazing down at his son for a few moments. Harry breathed with his mouth open, his face curled as if to shelter under his hand. His left wrist still lay, a scarred stump, higher on the pillow. Snape shook his head. If he considered getting his own hand back one tenth as important as this rebellion, he would have a second one already.

“Watching him, you look the picture of the peaceful father.”

Snape stiffened. He had not heard the door open, nor Joseph slip into the room. He did not turn. “He has just made me a bargain,” he said. “That I will try to be the best father I can to him, and he will be the best son he can to me. But that means I must talk to you.” He turned with a grimace to the Seer.

The man simply nodded, with one final glance at Harry. “He may benefit from talking with me, as well,” he said.

Snape concealed his triumph. "He has shamefully neglected his own healing since we returned," he said. "He believes that because he overcame the guilt he carried in the Midsummer battle, for example, he has nothing more to learn from someone like you."

Joseph nodded again. "I can See that," he said. "And as for you, Snape—forgive me, this is only something I have noticed through watching the two of you interact, and hearing your stories of him. Has he ever called you Severus?" He hesitated a moment, as if afraid the next step would be a step too far, and then finished, "Or Father?"

Snape toyed with the idea of hexing the Seer, but he had asked for this kind of thing when he agreed to Harry's bargain. Seers were made to walk into fire, it seemed. "No," he said. "He calls me Professor, or Professor Snape, or sir. I have never invited a closer term of address. He has never offered one."

Joseph nodded. "Please come with me," he said. "We don't want to disturb him, of course, and it seems that we have much to talk about."

Snape said nothing as he followed the Seer out, but he looked back at Harry before he shut the door. Harry was his son.

He could not help feeling a slight smugness as he followed Joseph, for all the danger the day had promised. Two good things had come out of it. The first was that Camellia the werewolf had acquired, and then lost, her magic. She knew true pain now, and she might learn some genuine humility out of it.

The second was that, while Harry's ability to create stronger wizards was sadly temporary, the Minister did not need to know that.

"We really must see if we can cure you of smirking like that," Joseph murmured.

Rufus looked out over the congregation of wizards and witches in front of him. Only some of them were reporters. Others were Ministry employees, and some had appeared the moment the Minister had announced he would hold a press conference. They were almost

certainly curious to see what a dictator looked like, Rufus knew. If no one charmed rotten fruit to fly at him, he would be surprised.

But then, he hadn't assumed the Ritual of Cincinnatus would make him popular.

He stepped up to the stage, with Frederick and Hope close beside him, and Percy further back, under a ward. Griselda Marchbanks was with him, and the hanarz, but most of the spectators only gave her odd glances and turned away. They would assume that the goblin was a personal attendant, Rufus knew, at best.

They were about to be rudely disabused.

He looked up into the flash of cameras, waited until he thought he had their attention, and began.

"As many of you know, I am currently in control of all magic in the Ministry," he said. And here came a wormy apple, right on cue, levitating at his face. Rufus flicked it lazily out of the way with his wand, hoping it had at least confirmed for whoever sent it that no, he did not control all magic outside the Ministry. They could stop murmuring about him hiding behind his walls, now. "I performed the Ritual of Cincinnatus with the help of sixteen Wizengamot members, including Elder Marchbanks." Griselda gave a little bow.

"What many of you do not know is why.

"Our society has struggled under a dark miasma of fear in the past few months. At first, we blamed it on the werewolf attacks. Then, it came to my attention that there had been attacks on Harry vates in the Ministry itself." Rufus ignored the gasps that arose, and the shouted questions about whether the Vox Populi had been right. "I pondered, but I had good information saying that the attack was not real, or at least misunderstood. I ignored it.

"And matters grew worse and worse. The fear grew stronger. Laws were passed making it impossible for werewolves to live among wizards. A jailbreak into Tullianum took place. Harry vates went into

rebellion. Ministry scandals broke. Our world shook itself to the foundations, and still I did not know what to do.

“Blame me for being so pathetic and weak. Blame me for waiting so long to do what needed to be done. In times of war, the British wizarding world looks first to its Minister, and I have failed you.

“I took up the reins on the same day that important information came to me. First, the werewolf packs were betrayed by dreams—dreams that inflamed the hatred of wizards who may have mildly disliked them, and then gave away the location of their safe houses.” Rufus heard the shouts cease, and a peach that had been rising above someone’s head dropped back with a splat. He concealed a grim smile. So, the Liberator was right. “And then, I learned that the hatred of werewolves in the Ministry, the impulse to create laws against them, came from a specific place: one of our own Departments, the Department of Mysteries.”

Everyone in the crowd looked up as owls abruptly lifted from behind the stage, soaring into the cloudy sky. They aimed in all directions, and scattered rapidly, their wings beating hard enough to cause a rain of feathers to fall.

“Those are owls bearing sealed letters containing this same information to a hundred people of my own choosing,” said Rufus calmly. “Those people include various foreign Ministers of Magic. If the Department of Mysteries chooses to try and Obliviate the lot of us, they will not succeed in stifling the truth.”

He saw a few people Apparate away. Rufus shrugged. They were outside the Ministry; not much he could do to stop them. And if they were frightened of the Unspeakables, then he could hardly blame them.

“They wanted werewolves to experiment on,” he said. “And they wanted to use the discoveries from that magic to control people.” He paused and swept the crowd with a sharp gaze. “All that hatred, all those laws, all that killing done, merely to insure that some werewolves came alive to Tullianum and their devices.

“They were the ones who attacked Harry vates. They are the ones who have spent lives, including the lives of people not connected at all with them, to insure that he is captured or taken, and brought nothing but death.” He took a deep breath, and told his first deliberate lie of the speech. Well, he’d had a lot of practice, since he was also guarding the Ritual of Cincinnatus.

“They were the ones who sent the dreams.”

He saw faces grow tight, and some of the looming fear in the crowd change to anger. Rufus nodded slightly. He would not say that Falco Parkinson had sent the dreams, although that was the truth, and he would certainly pass that truth along to Harry. He would not betray the Liberator that way; her family might be able to figure out from this announcement that she had helped him. And Falco would be less cautious if he did not realize that Rufus knew he existed, and that someone was spying on him and passing information along.

And besides, it made the Department of Mysteries into a perfect scapegoat. Rufus doubted that they would contradict him. To do so, they would have to break their own stated code of secrecy and silence. He expected an emissary from the Department to approach him instead, and offer a quiet peace agreement.

“We have lived in fear of shadows, and the full moon, too long,” Rufus concluded. “We will do so no longer. We will make sure that all our people know the difference between honest concern and open terror, and this is the end of terror’s reign.” He lifted one of the pieces of parchment in front of him. “Along with the repeal of the anti-werewolf laws, the Wizengamot is now considering what peace terms should be offered to Harry vates.”

“And when will your reign of terror be done, Minister?” someone bold called out.

“When it’s done,” said Rufus, and allowed himself a full, tooth-bared smile this time. “The Ministers in the past who did this? The Ritual of Cincinnatus killed ‘em if they tried to retain power beyond the point they needed it.”

More people blinked at him.

“As well,” said Rufus casually, nodding to the hanarz, “matters have changed between southern goblins and wizards. Madam Marchbanks and her partner, the hanarz, will be delighted to speak to you about that.”

He stepped back, to make it clear that although he lent his authority to what Griselda and the hanarz had to say, this had not been his idea, and he was not dominating their decisions.

He had done what he could, he thought. The Wizengamot had indeed seen the implications of Harry’s ability to make other wizards absorberes. They had agreed without hesitation to ask for peace, and to make the werewolf laws much less restrictive. They had hemmed and hawed on Harry’s other requests.

It would take work, Rufus knew. But arguments were much better than killing.

He saw a movement off to the side, and looked down. Aurora Whitestag was approaching the stage. She gazed up at him and smiled diffidently.

“Minister,” she said. “I was wondering if we might talk?”

Chapter Thirty-Six: Not Every Problem Is His To Solve

Connor winced as the door slammed. Then he rolled on his back and stared at the ceiling. He and the ceiling were fast becoming old friends.

He had tried, again, to explain to Parvati that there was little chance of Harry coming back and hurting them. She seemed to consider that he'd won his battle. Connor didn't see how. The Daily Prophet kept reporting on the progress of the arguments between Harry and the Ministry, as they tried to hammer out acceptable laws to apply to the werewolves, and debated about beginning to address the other terms that Harry had wanted, including representatives sent to the northern goblins and centaurs. Until that was finished, Connor knew Harry wouldn't think he'd "won."

Parvati had still argued that it was winning, and that Harry would come back all puffed up with pride and expecting the Light pureblood families to do as he bade them, since he'd not only taken their leader away but proven that everything they'd ever done in relation to the centaurs, goblins, and other species was wrong.

Connor couldn't help it; he'd laughed at the thought of Harry ever being proud, and Parvati had stormed out.

"Do you think she'll ever come 'round?" he asked Ron, without looking at him.

Ron uttered a loud grunt. Connor rolled over. Ron was bent over his Defense Against the Dark Arts textbook, studying hard enough that the back of his neck had turned red. Only Connor didn't think that was from the studying at all.

"If you're angry at me about Ginny running off to Harry, you know, you should say so and get it over with," he told Ron, then waited.

As expected, Ron slammed down his book and whirled around. "All right," he snarled. "She hasn't responded to one bloody Howler that Mum sent her. Not one! Does that mean she's happy for what she did? Not sorry for it? That she's not thinking about what's going to

happen when she comes home? Mum won't let her out of her sight. And she's blaming me for encouraging her somehow!" Ron's face twisted up. "How could I have? We were both in the dueling club last year, we both fought, but Hogwarts needed us!"

"So your mum's wrong," Connor concluded.

Ron glared at him. "Don't you say that!"

"But you didn't think Ginny was wrong to fight last year," said Connor, as reasonably as he could. "Why do you think Ginny was wrong to run off and fight this year?"

"Because she didn't take me with her!"

Well. That was unexpected. Connor lay in silence for a moment, blinking, and Ron leaped to his feet, so swiftly he almost hit his head on the canopy of his bed—he was growing, Connor thought, getting near as tall as his brother Charlie—and grabbed his book, stuffing it into his trunk. A moment later, he'd grabbed his broom, too, and looked at Connor. "Let's go practice," he said.

Connor was about to agree, since the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch match wasn't far away, when an owl he recognized came fluttering through the window of the tower room. He grinned and shook his head. "Sorry, Ron, got a letter from my friend," he said, and undid the letter tied to the owl's leg.

Ron swore under his breath and slammed the door shut behind him in unconscious imitation of Parvati. Connor tore the letter open, stroking the owl's feathers. She was beautiful, a dusky gray owl with black markings on her legs and around her eyes. Connor didn't know her breed, and neither did anyone whom he'd asked, but that didn't matter. She was affectionate, too, ducking her head and nipping gently at his fingers with her beak when he petted her.

The letter was sloppy, as always. Mark wasn't the best writer.

Hi Connor!

Everyone's all excited here. I don't think most of us know what to do with ourselves while Harry plots and plans. I mean, he must know what he's doing, right? But it's taking so bloody long! But no one else really wants to criticize Harry to his face, except George. And, well, George is all right and all, and I'm sure he misses his family, but they wouldn't want to take him back anyway, he's a werewolf. Try telling him that, though.

But for the most part, it's brilliant here still, it's just all the waiting that I can't stand. And it's a little overwhelming being around your brother, sometimes. Imagine a waterfall that walks around and sometimes grows a little louder than it needs to be and sheds rainbows in one color. That's what his magic feels like to me.

Still no definite answer on when we'll all be coming back. Harry's determined to have the Minister's word before he moves. I can't blame him for that. I want a law that says that we'll never be hunted again, but Merlin knows if we'll get that. The Ministry, bunch of bloody puffed-up fools, doesn't want to commit to anything, and Harry actually tore up the latest version of the laws they sent him because it was too restrictive.

Stupid idiots!

Anyway, I sent you something I was playing with and thought you might like. I carve sometimes when I have nothing better to do, and right now there's a lot of 'nothing better' to do. I know you said you were a Seeker, and I've seen pictures of you in the paper as a Seeker, too, so I hope you like it!

Best wishes,

Mark.

Connor shook the envelope, and a wooden Snitch fell out. The wings were just carved into the sides, and wouldn't actually beat, but Connor thought it could be enchanted to fly quite easily. He tapped it with his wand, and it rose and hovered back and forth, though the wings still didn't beat. Connor grabbed for it, and smiled.

Mark was a young werewolf who'd started to write to him a few days after everyone went to the valley. His first letter had been belligerent, insisting that he wanted to know things about Harry from his brother, because he didn't trust Harry not to lead them into a trap. Connor had snapped back, wondering if he would have to tell his brother about a traitor in the valley.

But Mark's second letter had been much gentler and more conciliatory, and Connor had eventually realized that what he needed was a friend, someone to talk to about events in Woodhouse. He was much younger than the other werewolves; apparently he'd just left Hogwarts two years ago, had drifted from place to place, and finally had been sent to the Ministry by his exasperated parents. Then he'd become part of the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts, and then he'd become a werewolf. His life was hard enough to stir some sympathy in Connor, and he wrote like an—like an ordinary person, the way Connor supposed he himself was in the wake of his revelation of Harry as the Boy-Who-Lived, the way Parvati had been when he liked her. It was nice to have an ordinary friend to talk to, even if Mark didn't tell him all that much that Connor couldn't learn from Harry himself.

And the Snitch made a fine gift.

Connor gathered up parchment and ink to write back, sprawling on his bed while the wooden Snitch darted around his head. Absently, he snatched it out of the air, and then winced. Those stiff little wings hurt.

Peter leaned forward, eyes traveling over the tables while he ate. Next to him, Henrietta Bulstrode made an anxious little noise in her throat. Peter glanced at her, and she caught his eye and jerked her head at the Hufflepuff table. He followed her line of sight.

Two seventh-year students were arguing in low, heated voices. One of them abruptly shook her head, and turned back to her meal. The other watched her with his face set in stone. Then he began eating, too. Peter raised his eyebrows.

“What?” he asked Henrietta. The students could have been arguing over Quidditch, exam marks, or, considering that they were male and female, a dating arrangement gone sour. Neither was in his NEWT Defense Against the Dark Arts, so he didn’t know them.

“The boy has a Dark Mark,” said Henrietta, as if this happened every day.

Peter stiffened. Henrietta pinched his arm, the left one, just above the Mark. Peter shook himself and remembered the lessons he’d learned during his months in the Death Eaters—hell, the lessons he’d learned in his seventh year, when he’d had to conceal disgust and anger to keep his friends. He picked up his fork and ate several peas. By the time he was done with that, he had remembered how to look calm again. “How can you know?” he murmured, his voice just a breath of air.

“Spell,” said Henrietta, and tapped her wand, which rode in her belt, close against her left hip. “It flashes me a vision of a dark green skull with a snake in its mouth whenever someone with a Dark Mark gets close enough. I know about yours, but now that Snape is gone, you should be the only one here who has one. And today that student passed me in the hall, and the skull flashed in front of me.”

“He’s not in your NEWT Transfiguration, either?” Peter asked, though he knew the answer as he did. If he were, then Henrietta would have sensed his Mark long before now.

“No,” said Henrietta. “I think his name is Leo, but that’s all I know about him. He wouldn’t have wanted to make an impression on many of his professors, I think.” She gave a thin smile and stroked her wand. “And now we know why.”

“If we try to corner him, he’ll run,” said Peter. He knew that much, from experience with some Marked Slytherins in his sixth year. Evan Rosier had very nearly killed someone else before he’d fled school grounds, simply because someone caught a glimpse of the Mark under his robe and stopped to ask him about his new tattoo.

"I know that," Henrietta said, in a slightly scornful voice, as if asking him what in the world he was doing, thinking she didn't know that. "Watch." She waved her wand and intoned an incantation that, to Peter, sounded singsong. He saw one of the forks next to Henrietta twitch and grow legs, and then it became an enormous ant, which slipped under the head table before anyone else could see it.

Peter could only make the ant out by squinting as it scuttled its way over to the Hufflepuff table; Henrietta had darkened it when she Transfigured it, so that the silver wouldn't flash and reveal its position. There could be no doubt when it reached the boy with the Dark Mark, though. He leaped to his feet, screaming and waving his arms as though he'd been stung, pulling attention from all over the Great Hall.

"Mr. Harkness!" Professor Sprout was on her feet, no doubt appalled that one of her students was causing such a disturbance in public. "What is the meaning of this?"

"There was a huge bug!" Leo cried back, and Peter wondered if his high-pitched voice was honest fear or good acting. Then he winced. He hated that he had to wonder things like that. "It—" He pointed under the table, but Peter would have given good Galleons on the chance that Henrietta's little toy had already hidden itself in a shadowy corner. Leo's face fell. "Well, there was one right here," he concluded, rather lamely.

"That is no reason to disrupt dinner," said Professor Sprout sternly. Pomona was generally cheerful, Peter thought as he watched her, but then, most of the students in her class paid strict attention, so as not to get eaten by dangerous plants. And she did expect better behavior of her House than this. "You will sit down at once."

"Yes, ma'am," said Leo, sounding thoroughly abashed, and started to.

Henrietta had murmured another spell, however, one that Peter recognized as a cutting curse that did not produce a visible line of light. As Leo sat down, his left robe sleeve sagged, slit down the line of the seam.

And because everyone was looking at him, everyone saw the Mark.

The screams were immediate, and the girl sitting next to him was one of the first to crowd away, the expression of horror on her face so genuine that Peter didn't think their argument had been about the Mark after all. Leo froze for a moment, and then leaped to his feet and drew his wand, obviously intending to fight his way out of the Hall.

Wards lashed out of the wall, blue lines that bound his arms to his sides and squeezed on his wrist until he dropped his wand with a squall of pain. Then Minerva's voice spoke, so cold that most of the screams stopped at once, and Leo turned bulging, miserable eyes on her.

"Mr. Harkness," she said. "I will deal with you now." She left the head table with a sweep of her robes and a curl of color along the edges of them—a result of the wards that foamed around the Hogwarts Headmistress and hissed with her indignation. The wards gripping Leo turned and pulled him straight into the stones, bearing him to the Headmistress's office by the shortest route. The last sound he made before he vanished was a miserable, strangled cry.

"I suppose I should go, too, and inform her of what I know," said Henrietta casually, standing. "Which isn't much." She cocked her head at Peter. "You'll stay here?"

"Yes," said Peter faintly, and moved to join his other colleagues in calming the frightened students while Henrietta strode through them like they weren't there and vanished out the Hall's doors.

Peter shook his head as he walked towards the Gryffindor table to check on his students. Previously, he had divided the entirety of the school into three rough groups, based on their reactions to the Ministry and Harry's negotiations: scornful, the ones who were impatient for this all to be over with and thought nothing would change; frightened, those who thought this would mean things would change fundamentally and were wary of sharing a school with a fellow student so powerful; and supportive, those who understood something about why Harry was doing what he had done and embraced it.

Now, it seemed as though he needed to add potential Death Eaters to the list.

Minerva arrived in her office to find Leo sitting in a chair, his eyes wide and his hands flexing as if he could grip the wards and rip them apart like ropes. He stopped trying to tear them when he saw her, and instead only lowered his head so that his chin rested on his chest, avoiding her eyes.

Minerva opened her mouth, ready to say something, and then decided that it would be best to wait for Professor Sprout and Henrietta; she had noticed the other woman's games at the head table, whether or not Henrietta thought she had. She had not been Transfiguration Professor for nothing. She sat down and waited in the midst of a cold silence. Leo sometimes looked at her as if he would like to say something, but he always turned his head away again, as much as the wards would permit him.

Minerva considered him in the meanwhile. He had been a student in her classes for five years, and she had known him, slightly. He worked quietly, and the only time she remembered him losing points for Hufflepuff was in his first year, when he had a hard time not talking to his friends in class. He was a halfblood, or so she thought; he had said something to her once about his mother being a witch, and how he had thought the spells in Hogwarts would be easier than what she'd taught him at home. He was slight, with brown hair and brown eyes and an altogether unremarkable appearance. It seemed that he'd continued that trend of ordinariness, and turned it into a virtue for his Death Eater status.

Soon enough, Pomona spoke the password for the gargoyle. Henrietta arrived just behind her, according to the wards, and both of them rode the staircase upwards. Minerva composed herself, and put memories of the child Leo had been away. What mattered now was that he was a young man, and he had made this decision, and they would deal with him as an adult.

Pomona arrived and immediately turned and stared at Leo. "Mr. Harkness," she said, and then no more. She simply shook her head. Minerva was glad to see that. Last year, Filius had defended one of

his students who attacked Harry, and who had turned out to be a Death Eater. Pomona might have done the same if there were no conclusive proof, but not with the Mark glaring black on his arm.

“The extent of his involvement in the Death Eaters is what we are here to determine,” said Minerva calmly. “Be seated, Pomona, Hilda.” She remembered to speak Henrietta’s disguise-name just in time.

Pomona took a seat with such rapidity that she almost tripped over her robes; she couldn’t seem to look away from her student. Henrietta sat down primly, sweeping her skirts around her. Minerva could see why she had chosen this disguise. It was almost as far as one could get from the dangerous woman Henrietta Bulstrode was known for being, who would want robes that did not hinder her movement.

“Mr. Harkness,” said Minerva then, facing him, “you are accused of being a Death Eater. Do you deny the accusation?”

Leo was silent for long moments, as if trying to decide how much he ought to tell. Then he said, “I never—I’ve never met the Dark Lord or anything like that. I just have the Mark.”

“And why is that?” Considering that she wanted to shout, Minerva thought she did well in keeping her voice just cold enough to crack stone.

“My mother—my mother supported the Death Eaters in the First War,” said Leo, and jerked his head nervously. “She spent a year in Azkaban, but she was released, finally. She never really gave up on him, though.” He threaded his fingers together and clenched them. The wards that held him would let him do that much. “She talked to me about the Dark Lord. A lot. And sometimes she thought he would come again, and she could do more than she had. But she didn’t know what to do about it, until she heard of his resurrection.”

The words were spilling out now, and Minerva quietly told the wards in her office to record what Leo said. It might be that they would need it for testimony later, if Pensieve memories did not prove to be enough.

“Then she spoke to one of the Death Eater recruiters when he came. Azkaban broke her. She—she couldn’t really do anything to help the war. But she could ask me to take the Mark. I did, this summer, when I turned seventeen. I just—I just wanted to please her, that’s all.” Leo’s lips and eyelids were both trembling. “I’ve never killed anyone. I swear. My mum’s not even Marked. She just supported the Dark Lord and lent money to him. And I don’t know if I even believe what he does.” He stared miserably at the Mark on his arm, as if it should have the answers.

Pomona closed her eyes. Henrietta, cool as Midwinter, said, “He is lying.”

Leo’s eyes flashed open, and he stared at her. Minerva frowned. “In what way?”

“Only the Dark Lord can give the Dark Mark,” said Henrietta. “And it must happen in an initiation. If he didn’t meet the Dark Lord, then he would not bear the Mark. That is the truth of it.”

“I didn’t meet him!” Leo’s voice was shrill with fear now. “I swear, I didn’t, I didn’t. The recruiter was the one who gave me the Mark. He pointed the wand at me and intoned Morsmordre, and there it was. It wasn’t an initiation. I didn’t kill anyone. I swear.”

“Extend your arm,” said Minerva, and he nearly snapped the wards in doing so. She bent forward and stared at the Mark on his arm, frowning. It was true that it looked exactly as it should look, black snake and skull entwined, and it radiated magic that rang as Dark to her senses.

On the other hand, she had wards on the grounds that should have prevented someone with the Dark Mark and hostile intent from entering the school at all. And if Leo hadn’t killed someone, it was not a true initiation. That much, the Order of the Phoenix had known since the First War. All Death Eater initiations involved a murder, though the exact method of killing and the age of the victim would vary widely.

“Keep your arm extended, Mr. Harkness,” she said, and pointed her own wand at the Mark. “Abi in malam rem!”

Leo gasped as the magic broke over his flesh, gripping his skin and twisting it. Minerva flinched a bit as she listened to his howls, but didn’t let it show on her face. It was a painful Transfiguration, but it was also nearly as good a test as Veritaserum would be. The spell banished an unwanted change back to the person who had first cast the spell. If Leo had wanted to bear the Dark Mark—another trait of Death Eaters; the Mark could only come to one who was willing—then the brand would stay in place, and Minerva would arrange with Horace for Veritaserum.

But the Mark shrank and writhed and paled, and then it gathered itself into a hive of black bees that flew, angrily buzzing, at the wall and vanished. Leo stared down at his arm. A faint, white scar in the shape of the snake and skull still showed. Minerva nodded. He had been partially willing, then. And since Henrietta had seen fit to reveal the Mark in front of the Great Hall, they would have to insist that Leo leave Hogwarts for at least a little while. But he was supremely unlikely to be executed or imprisoned, now, and he would be able to return to Hogwarts next year, if no earlier, to finish his NEWTS.

“Thank you,” Leo whispered. “Thank you.”

Minerva nodded to him again. “You are welcome, Mr. Harkness. However, I believe that it would be best if you stayed away from home for right now? What would your mother do to you when she noticed this Mark gone?”

Leo closed his eyes.

“I have friends who can find him a place to stay,” said Pomona, her face bright with relief at not having to expel one of her students. She stood and held out her arm. “Come along, Mr. Harkness.”

Minerva didn’t relax the wards. “Just one moment, Pomona.” She turned back to Leo. “I want your binding oath that you will never truly take the Mark, and that you will not take up arms against Hogwarts,” she said.

Leo gave the oath gladly, swearing it in the name of Merlin and his magic, and then Minerva let Pomona lead him away. She was already speaking gently to him as they went. The gentle tone would hide sharp questions, Minerva knew. If the boy was hiding anything else, Pomona would have it out of him before he left school.

That left her alone with Henrietta, who frowned slightly. "So that Mark was a false one?"

"It was," Minerva confirmed. "A Transfiguration. The recruiter, whoever he was, doubtless did it nonverbally, and used Morsmordre to cover that. But it was not an initiation." She frowned at Henrietta. "I wish you had come to me privately with this, instead of confronting him before the Great Hall. He might not have had to leave school."

"And he might have been lying," said Henrietta, without batting an eye. "There was no way to tell, and I take no chances where Harry's safety is concerned."

Minerva told herself this was a natural consequence of hiring someone like Henrietta Bulstrode as a professor, and dismissed her. Then she sat back behind her desk and closed her eyes.

So we have someone giving false Dark Marks to those who might succumb to familial pressure to bear them. And why? To keep the Ministry occupied? To ruin the reputations of ordinary wizards and witches? But most of those who would be most damaged by being exposed as Death Eaters are so opposed to Voldemort that they would never agree to carry the Dark Mark in the first place.

So involved was she in her thoughts that she did not notice the gargoyle beginning to move until it already had. Then she opened her eyes and looked sharply through the wards. A student was on her way up the staircase, a student with long blonde hair and large glasses whom Minerva recognized a few moments later.

Miss Lovegood. And what does she want? There was the possibility that she might have information on Leo, as, last year, she had been able to tell Minerva which of the Ravenclaw students had cast the

Entrail-Expelling Curse at Harry. Therefore, Minerva waited until the door to her office opened and Luna stepped inside.

Luna's face was intent, and she moved across the office with a silence and purpose that Minerva found herself curiously reluctant to interrupt. She reached the middle, just before Minerva's desk, and turned around, hands extended and pointing towards the bookshelves. Minerva glanced from side to side, but could see no books rising from their settings in what might be response to a nonverbal spell or accidental magic. She returned to looking at Luna, a bit bemused, but willing to wait. Since learning the girl heard impressions from objects, she was much more tolerant of her foibles, and had instructed the other professors to be the same way.

Luna opened her mouth and moved her lips in round shapes, as if tasting bubbles. Then she gave a little hop forward and held out her arms in front of her. Her fingers poked and prodded at an invisible wall for a long moment before she abruptly opened her eyes and smiled.

"It's gone," she said. "It really is."

"Miss Lovegood?" Minerva kept her voice from sounding irritated, but she was not sure puzzled was that much better. It would have done her incredible harm with any number of sixth-year Gryffindor students. But Luna seemed too far gone in her own concerns to notice if the Headmistress sounded confused, and answered seriously.

"There was an object in your office that hated the whole world, Headmistress," she said. "I felt it when I visited you last year to tell you what the chairs said about Gilbert Rovenan. It was so angry. It hated, and it wanted to tear and rend and destroy." She faced Minerva with a dazzling beam. "But it's gone."

"It is," said Minerva flatly. She was not sure what most disturbed her: that she could have had something like that in her office, no doubt a dangerous enchanted object of some kind, or that it could have moved.

“Yes.” Luna smiled at the bookcases. “When you reorganized your office, you must have got rid of it. You got rid of a lot, I think. These shelves are new.” She stepped forward and ran one hand across the wood. “And happy with it,” she added. “New objects like being in places full of old ones. They can talk and share stories that they might never get to hear, otherwise.”

Minerva prevented herself, with difficulty, from deterring into a discussion of what stories her bookshelves might have heard. The thought of the walls, floors, and doors watching her every move of their own accord, without wards, was disconcerting. “Do you know what it was, Miss Lovegood?”

“I never knew,” said Luna, her voice already back to its content, dreamy self. “It felt like a Wrackspurt, and I know that Wrackspurts come into people’s heads at night and cause evil dreams, or change their actions. But it wasn’t a Wrackspurt, because then it would have come into someone’s head, not into an object. They can’t control objects.” She gave a little frown. “Headmistress, could you tell people to stop splashing water on the stones in the courtyard? Several of them spent centuries at the bottom of an ocean, and they don’t like the wet. Rain and snow is bad enough. I’ve tried talking to the people who splash across them dripping from Quidditch practice, but they don’t want to listen to me.”

Minerva felt the same helplessness that had confronted Luna’s professors for so long, before they began learning how to listen. She restrained it, and said only, “I’m afraid that you must take that up with Madam Hooch, Miss Lovegood. Perhaps she would be willing to tell the Quidditch teams that they must dry thoroughly before they come in from the practice field. And, of course, there are the students trekking back and forth from Professor Sprout’s greenhouses to consider, and the Care of Magical Creatures classes.”

“I didn’t think about them,” said Luna, brightening. “I’ll talk to the professors, Madam. Thank you.” She turned and wandered out of the office.

Minerva gave her walls another searching glance. It was true she had moved most of Albus’s artifacts out of the office after last year, but

she thought she would have known if she had something that powerfully enchanted, and Dark, in here.

She thought.

What could it have been? And where could it have gone? The worse thought was definitely that the thing possessed the power of moving itself about.

Hawthorn opened her eyes with a start. She'd had trouble sleeping, of late. If she wasn't having nightmares of Tullianum Prison, she was having nightmares of the Thorn Bitch's plants tearing Pansy apart in front of her.

She sat up and called Lumos to her wand, which sent flickering shadows around the room—but that was better than the absolute darkness she had tried to sleep in. Once, she had only been able to sleep without light. Lately, it gave her foul dreams.

She stood, scratching her left arm, and walked across her narrow room to stare out the window. She could see the moon from here. It was very nearly full.

She would have to transform, again. Her skin crawled with the thought.

She had become used to being a werewolf, but she would never love it, the way that so many members of the packs did. She would never want anything more than to be a pureblood witch again. Well, and she wanted her husband and daughter, but she knew that was impossible.

The cure might not be.

Hawthorn watched the moon, and remembered what Harry had said of the potion he thought might help cure lycanthropy, and how each werewolf would have to prepare his or her own dose, and how even then it was difficult and stood a sixty percent chance of killing the werewolf.

The thought came sneaking into her head, for the first time. Before, she had only allowed herself to consider brewing processes, and spells that might let her transfer her magic into a liquid.

I would be willing to take the risk.

She had said she was going to live, after Harry came back and after they swore to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, but she hadn't, had she? A month and a half of blissful life, and then she had been cast into the cells.

Those three days without the sun, at the mercy of the moon, had changed something fundamental in her, Hawthorn knew, something she was still recovering from. She would bear what she had to bear, and she would survive, because suicide was for weaklings and cowards. But she did not want to live as she had been, a beast who could be hunted and hated. The new werewolf laws might make her more acceptable, but she would still smell the fear and disgust around normal wizards and witches, now that they knew what she was.

She could take no pleasure in it, as someone like Camellia could. Camellia had been bitten before she was a year old; she had never known anything else, at least not that she could remember. Hawthorn had spent decades of her life as a normal witch. A little more than three years of being a werewolf was not enough to make her a Camellia.

She closed her eyes. I want to change once more—become a normal witch, with no lycanthropy.

Once, and no more.

She would begin working on the werewolf cure for herself, tomorrow. Adalrico sighed and bent to bandage his heel again. The Fisher King Curse that Augustus Starrise had gifted him with before he died needed to be regularly tended to and cleaned and bandaged. The wound would not kill him, and it would not become infected, and it would not close. It simply existed, impairing his walking and his life, if he allowed the smell to build.

He had become very good at spells that would conceal foul scents since Augustus died, even from werewolves. There was that to be said for the state of things.

But when one was awake in the middle of the night, troubled by evil dreams of one's own past, learning to conceal foul scents seemed small compensation. Adalrico scratched his left shoulder and yawned, then lay down again next to Elfrida, trying not to wake her. Marian slept in a cot in a corner of the room, and Millicent was in the room next door. Too easy to stir someone to alertness, if he did not watch out.

And then, of course, he couldn't sleep. He lay awake and stared over his wife's shoulder instead, watching the reflections of the moonlight on the wall.

This was not the war he had envisioned when he had joined Harry, he thought. He had thought he would have a chance to fight those who were trying to stifle all independence and change in the wizarding world, whether those wizards were Light or Dark. Part of him had rejoiced at going to war again, after so many years of peace. He had served an unworthy master the last time, but this time there had come one worthy of a Bulstrode. When Harry had built the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, and then cast his defiance in the Minister's face, Adalrico had been ecstatic. Surely, now, he would have a chance to fight.

And he had not. Other than their jailbreak in the Ministry, the fights had ended before he could enter them, and he had not had the time to cast a single spell.

Elfrida stirred and murmured against him. Adalrico comfortingly rubbed her shoulder, still watching the light and shadows on the wall.

He wanted to fight. He wanted to prove to the wizarding world that the Bulstrodes had pride still. Their motto was *Duramus, We endure*, but he also wanted to triumph. The best way he could do that was in battle, and there was so little chance of that, as long as Harry operated by tact and diplomacy and argument. His daughter was a

different case, but Millicent had proven that she was an adult woman to him this summer, no longer standing in his shadow. He could not point to her as an example of his honor; she had her own.

And whose fault is that?

Adalrico took a long breath, wrinkled his nose at the smell that always lingered after he had changed his bandages, and closed his eyes. It was his own fault, his own fault entirely. This was not the war he had envisioned. That did not make it the wrong war. It meant he had something to contribute, if he could look beyond the end of his nose. He had known some tact; he had managed to survive in the vipers' nest that was the Death Eaters, after all. Perhaps he should be thinking about drawing on that experience to serve Harry, instead of expecting Harry's experience to change so he could show off to advantage.

He was an adult, and a wizard, and he had lived through much, including the first rise and the first fall of the Dark Lord. Now was only another change to ride.

It was not long after that before his breathing slowed and deepened to match his wife's, and he fell back into a sleep that, this time, was plagued by no evil dreams.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Homo Homini Lupus

Rufus signed his name to the document with a flourish, then sat back and looked over it. He felt sure Harry would agree to this set of laws. They did everything that he had asked for, and they were more than he might have expected to win over two years of asking.

They insisted that werewolves had the same rights as wizards—the right to exist without being hunted, the right to fair trials if they were accused of crimes, the right to hold wands and paying jobs and property, the right to custody of their children, and the right to exist without collars and without papers and without experimentation. They included provisions for distribution of Wolfsbane to werewolves who agreed to register themselves as lycanthropes; otherwise, due to the fact that people existed who would buy Wolfsbane just to keep it out of the hands of werewolves, they would have to make their own arrangements. Since Harry had mentioned in his last letter that he thought there was a possibility that a werewolf cure might emerge someday, after months of dedicated work, Rufus had added a promise that the funds originally used to establish the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts would go to studying the cure instead.

In a few weeks, the new Goblin Board would begin sending its representatives out to negotiate with the northern goblins. Most of the representatives were human, but there were some southern goblins, at the hanarz's insistence. Rufus hoped they would be able to begin by the sixteenth of November.

And there were some wizards in training with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to contact the centaurs. Rufus was privately uncertain how effective that would be; unless Harry led every party himself, there remained a certain element of terror in venturing into the Forbidden Forest. But it was the good faith effort that Harry had asked for.

The bigger projects—in particular, reaching out to magical species all around the world, and potentially eliminating the boundaries between wizards and Muggles—would have to wait. Rufus didn't think they would be able to accomplish them anyway, given how protective

other wizarding communities tended to be of their own territory, but Harry had surprised him before. If he could succeed, then Rufus had no problems lending his voice and praise to Harry's efforts.

And so, it was done.

All except for one thing, of course.

Rufus turned his head expectantly towards the door just as the knock sounded. The hardest thing to give up when the Ritual of Cincinnatus left him, he thought, would be the wards. He had adapted to using them almost as a second pair of eyes. He had caught two Aurors beating a prisoner that way the other day—they obviously hadn't realized the Minister controlled wards in Tullianum, as well—and several more employees in minor infractions that he could come in and personally inquire about. The temporary Head of the Auror Office, a young man named Bingley, was scrambling hard to keep up with everything, but Rufus had done better on his own than he expected.

And now he knew that an Unspeakable was coming to see him.

"Come in," he called.

The young man who walked in had his hood down, giving Rufus his first glimpse of an Unspeakable's face. He was handsome enough, a wizard with black hair and brown eyes and vaguely familiar features; Rufus thought he might have known this one's brother or father in Auror training once. He sat down facing Rufus and inclined his head in a shallow nod, before speaking in that same inflectionless voice they all had.

"Minister. The Stone has offered this peace treaty." He held out a parchment that Rufus knew wasn't enchanted with harmful spells. He had specifically forbidden the members of the Department of Mysteries to use any magic in their own domain. This had been written entirely by hand; they hadn't even been able to Accio the parchment or the quill to themselves.

Rufus scanned it carefully. Every term was just as he'd asked for, though, even in the language that he asked for. The Department of

Mysteries agreed to stop their experiments on werewolves, to serve the good of the Ministry first and foremost instead of their own good, not to war with Harry, and to avoid pressuring the members of the Wizengamot as they had done in the recent past with Amelia Bones and others. They also agreed to reduce their spy wards throughout the Ministry to wards on Tullianum and on the eighth floor, the Atrium, only; those wards would help defend the Department.

Rufus wondered if he could really trust the Department of Mysteries. But then, he had ruined their cover of secrecy rather spectacularly. In the past few weeks, his people had called loudly and more loudly for an investigation into the Department itself, to split it open and expose its secrets to the air. Rufus had known that trying to force the Unspeakables to open their doors would be walking into a death trap, especially given the Stone's immunity to magic. But he could and would use the stalemate to reach an agreement, and now it seemed that he had.

"You know that by signing this, it commits you?" he asked, and held out the parchment towards the Unspeakable. "And if we see you disobeying anything on this list, or even suspect that you have, I will simply disband the Department and declare all Unspeakables outlaws."

The man gave him a thin smile, but his voice remained the same inflectionless wonder as before. "We do, Minister. I have the Stone's full permission to sign this, I assure you. And we do find it much easier to work within the Ministry than outside it." He picked up the quill on Rufus's desk.

Rufus shuddered. He could feel the ripple and twitch in the air, the sliding power of another mind in the room with him. He lifted his head with an effort, and met the Unspeakable's eyes, and realized the Stone was looking out at him from them.

"I am here," said the voice. It was deep now, and no longer without inflection, though the words stopped and started at odd points, and Rufus would not have said that he could identify the emotion that inhabited them. "I have approved this."

The Unspeakable bent and signed The Stone. The words blazed across the parchment to Rufus's eyes, letters of red and gold, and then the great presence departed, and he was left sitting at his desk, stunned and shaken. The young man rose to his feet, bowed, and then turned and left as well.

It is just as well that we never tried to go to war with that thing. This is inadequate as a punishment for all they have done, but it is the best we can do.

Rufus gathered up the signed documents and turned around to hand them to Percy for copying. One set would go to the Daily Prophet, which tracked all the negotiations, and one to Harry. If he approved them, then the debacle would be done and the rebellion could conclude.

Rufus rather hoped Harry would approve them, and not just because he was tired of the arguing. There was something rather poetic about a rebellion that began with September's full moon and ended with October's.

"What are you worried about, Harry?"

Harry started. He had come into the room where Joseph was waiting for him to begin one of their talks, but his thoughts had been elsewhere, and he had believed he was alone. "I'm not worried about anything new," he said, and sat down. "I think we were talking about my hand last time, sir."

"Call me Joseph," said the Seer, sitting back and cocking his head. "And, forgive me, Harry, but most people who observe you for a long period of time will note the way your forehead furrows and you bite your lip when you're worried about something. And you were doing it just now."

Harry sighed. I have to learn to control my facial features. Another set of lessons, I suppose. "The full moon is coming," he said. "The third one since Loki made his vow of vengeance. That means that he's going to attack and kill the third hunter who killed his mate, Gudrun."

“And you are worrying about finding this hunter and sparing his life?” Joseph asked.

Harry scowled. Joseph had a gentle and patient tone that made him want to hit things. It was even worse than Vera's. Vera, he hadn't met under the best circumstances, and so he was willing to forgive her almost anything once he accepted the idea that she'd spied on his soul without his consent. But Joseph was supposed to be Snape's Seer, and Harry had agreed to talk to him only under duress. “Yes, of course I am,” he said shortly. “It was partly Kieran's death that made me start this rebellion in the first place, and a wish to find some other way for wizards and werewolves to live together that didn't depend upon oaths of vengeance. But I don't even know where the third hunter is, just that his family has taken him into hiding somewhere in France. And I'm sure Loki has already crossed the Channel by now.”

“Have you warned his family about the consequences of standing in his way?” Joseph asked.

“I sent owls. I never received a reply.”

“Then you have done all you can,” said Joseph firmly. “But this is a new subject for us, and one I would like to discuss. Kieran's death.”

Harry shook his head and stood, turning towards the door.

“Harry.”

“I agreed to talk to you because I wanted to be a better son to Professor Snape,” Harry said quietly, staring straight ahead. “And because I recognize my own healing is an important goal.” Just one that takes up so much damn time, time I can't afford right now. It had ended up taking Draco and Snape together to insist that he talk to Joseph at all. He would have been willing to make another journey to the Sanctuary, but in the future, not right now. These arguments with Joseph took away from valuable time when he could have been talking over future plans with the packs, reviewing the latest laws the Minister'd sent him, peeking in on Hawthorn as she worked with the lycanthropy cure, soothing the karkadann, conversing with the northern goblins and the centaurs, envisioning his Animagus form,

studying the final curse on his hand, or simply resting with Draco. "Not because I thought that I needed to heal from every single thing that had ever happened to me."

"Kieran's death had some part in the beginning of the rebellion, you said," said Joseph. "Obviously, it's recent, and it's important to you. I would like to know why."

Harry let his breath out. He could get angry, of course he could, but it was unproductive to get angry at Joseph. He simply looked at Harry, or Snape for that matter, with wise and patient eyes, and it worked as well as hitting a brick wall—more likely to break something in the one doing the hitting than move the recipient anywhere.

"It's a horrible story," he said. "I promised to protect Kieran, and I couldn't. He died. I failed." He swallowed several times, and for a moment saw Loki again, shimmering pale as he smashed through the door. He saw Kieran's blood flying, heard the flesh parting under Loki's nails and teeth. He remembered the feeling of spinning down and down as he had knelt there, the momentary impulse to kill himself and be done with it. If everything he put his hand to failed anyway, the world could more than spare him, it would be better off without him.

And he had hauled himself back from that, because he had known that the world would not really be better off without him, and he had transformed that despair into determination to see wizards and werewolves adopt some better way of living side by side. If he could have saved Kieran, he might not ever have found that stubbornness. He would still have done something when he heard Hawthorn was arrested, but it might not have been rebelling.

It's past, and I rescued what scraps of worth I could from that, and made use of them. Harry deliberately slowed his breathing. I don't need to talk about it the way Joseph imagines I need to talk about it. Snape gains value from reliving his memories because he denied they happened for so long, or he rewrote them in his mind and made them into something else. I haven't done that. I remember all my failures very well, thank you.

"I think there is more to it than that," said Joseph.

Harry blinked, and returned to the room, and remembered the last words he'd spoken to Joseph. He shook his head and gave him a grim smile. "Nothing important."

"Really." Joseph leaned forward. "I have seen how fervently you defend all those around you, Harry. I do not like to imagine what would happen if someone under your protection died. It must have been a horrible evening for you."

"I told you it was a horrible story," said Harry, with a slight shrug.

"Have you spoken with anyone about this at all?" Joseph pressed. "Draco, one of your adult allies, Severus?"

"No," said Harry. "I don't see the need to. I took all the lessons I could from it, and that's the end."

"What were the lessons?"

"That I needed to do something more than make empty promises," snapped Harry, and winced as he saw a current of wind pick up from the corner of his eye, rattling the delicate parchment maps that Joseph had hung on the walls, and which seemed to be his main form of decoration. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll ever be ready or willing to talk about this," he added, and then stepped out and shut the door behind him.

The bird was waiting for him in the hall. It didn't try to claw him this time. It simply clung to the wall of the corridor, not very far away given how narrow most rooms in Woodhouse were, and stared at him. The claws on its wings opened and flexed shut in peculiar ways. Its red eyes were more piercing when it wasn't laughing at him, Harry thought, not less.

"I don't know what you want," he whispered to it. "I have tried to kill Voldemort before. It didn't work. Twice, the Killing Curse didn't work."

The bird flew over and hovered in front of him. Harry braced himself for another meaningless image. The bird had taken to showing him those over the past weeks. One was a dark burrow with a golden cup inside it, and one a dark house that looked vaguely familiar, but was surrounded by trees in full leaf that Harry was sure he had never seen, and one was a view of Hogwarts, and one was a cramped, narrow desk in an unpleasantly Muggle-looking place.

Harry had tried asking questions about the images. He had tried drawing them and showing them to others, but Snape and Draco and Thomas couldn't tell him what they meant either. He had tried willing himself to Apparate to them, but other than Hogwarts, where he didn't want to go until his rebellion was officially finished and he could be readmitted as a student, they were too indistinct to permit that. He didn't know what to do with them.

But this time, the bird didn't show him a meaningless image, but one full of meaning. In fact, it was a fat leather-bound book with a title printed on the spine in letters of silver. Harry raised an eyebrow. The title was *Of Lords and Their Powers*, and he had brought the book with him from the Black libraries.

That image faded, and a number appeared, also glittering silver against a dark background. 453.

Harry shook his head—he still didn't understand why the bird couldn't simply speak and tell him what it wanted him to know instead of sending him images and book pages to look up—but he went to his bedroom and opened his trunk. Draco was lounging on the bed and looked up with a welcoming smile, but he stilled as the blankets near his feet shifted. Harry knew that would be the only indication Draco would have of the presence of the bird, which had followed him.

Harry opened *Of Lords and Their Powers*, and flipped to page 453. It began in the middle of a paragraph, which he skimmed without interest—something about the consequences of Lords gaining the protection of Light or Dark after Declaring, which he already knew. The bird had to know he would never Declare, even if it wanted him to do so.

There was a paragraph under that, though, which read:

There is one final requirement to being considered a true Lord, which I almost hesitate to mention. On the surface, it seems simple and obvious, and not only most Lords but most wizards would not be who they are without it. But at the same time, there have been some powerful wizards who abruptly lost their magic, and this was the only reason they could offer: magic loves to be used. Magic loves to be made much of, and noticed, and appreciated. Though the personalities it develops when under confinement vary, one may say the major component of them all is vanity. These few powerful Lords or almost-Lords who lost their magic did it through treating it like a shoe or a robe, only something useful, and never showing any wonder or delight or appreciation. Of course, most wizards, for whom their magic is their being, need never worry about this.

Harry lowered the book and stared at the bird. It stalked in a circle, lashing its tail, and stared back.

"I don't know what that has to do with the images you showed me," Harry whispered.

The bird lifted and flew at him, landing on his shoulder and giving him a sharp nip on the earlobe with its toothed beak. Then it flew at the wall, vanishing on the way. Harry grimaced and touched his ear, which dripped blood.

"Here." Draco was already beside him with a cloth, which Harry took gratefully to mop at the wound. "What was that all about? I notice it didn't scratch you this time, but biting isn't much better."

"It wanted me to read this." Harry tapped the paragraph; he had the book hovering in the air in front of him, cradled by his Levitation Charm. "I think I understand why. What I don't understand is how that has any connection with the burrow and the house and Hogwarts and the desk it showed me."

Draco bent down and read the paragraph, one hand on the book and one on Harry's left shoulder. Both tightened as he continued reading. Then he lifted his head and said, "I thought of this when you offered

to share the absorbere gift with me, Harry, and now that I've noticed it, I can't stop noticing it. You don't appreciate your magic enough. There are times you rejoice in it, but how rare are those times? Even for magic that can't hurt anyone? For example, I don't think I've ever heard you sing like a phoenix unless you're trying to heal someone or express sorrow."

Harry felt his face flush. "And you think that's connected to why the magic won't let me give any of it back to Camellia?"

He had tried again and again since Snape deemed him healthy enough to get out of bed after the failed attempt at giving the absorbere gift to Draco. Camellia had a magical core now, just as a Squib did; Harry ought to have been able to fill it as he had the magical cores of the children turned Squibs by the Midsummer attack. He should have been able to drink magic from Black artifacts and pass it along.

His magic wouldn't let him. Every time he opened his absorbere gift, the bird appeared, settling heavy and claw-prickly onto his shoulder, and watched. As long as he only drank magic, it didn't mind. But the moment he turned that towards some goal like feeding Camellia or pouring it into the lycanthropy cure or, Merlin forbid, trying to weave a magical core for another Muggle werewolf, the bird attacked him. Harry winced, and touched his hand, still holding the cloth, to his face in remembrance. When he'd tried to create a magical core for Rose, the bird had slashed his face, and come extremely near to taking his eye. Only a spell Snape had learned from Madam Pomfrey had let Harry not have a second scar on his face.

Harry had put all that down to the vicious streak of temper the bird seemed to have developed trapped between him and Voldemort. He had assumed its fit over his giving both Camellia and Draco extra power would pass, and he would be able to use the absorbere gift for more than just digesting magic again. But now he had to wonder. Was the magic doing that because it was angry that he didn't appreciate it enough?

"Yes," said Draco, and again Harry had to struggle, as with Joseph, to remember the last thing he'd said to him. "I think that's exactly it,

Harry. Maybe the magic would have been content to let you do this forever if Voldemort hadn't used that ritual to resurrect himself, because Thomas says the connection between you wasn't really a tunnel until then. But now it's aware, and it wants you to do certain things with it." He tilted Harry's chin up until he met his eyes. "Can you blame it?" he whispered. "When you know that the goblins and the house elves labored unacknowledged for centuries, and how unfair that was?"

Harry winced. "I just—Draco, I dislike using my magic for things that don't help other people."

"Why not?"

"Self-indulgence," said Harry flatly. "It's self-indulgence, and I can't afford that."

"In this case, I think it's indulgence of your magic, and nothing else." Draco ran a soothing hand down his back. Harry had noticed him picking up a habit of that since he arrived at Woodhouse. More disturbing was his own new habit to relax into the stroking and arch his back towards it. "Think about it, Harry. You respect the free wills of more people and magical creatures than I would ever be able to. Respecting the free will of your magic shouldn't be hard."

"It's not that," said Harry. "I'm not afraid of the effects on my magic, Draco. I'm afraid of the effects on myself."

Draco laughed. "You think you'll become a Lord just through allowing yourself to delight in your abilities more?" He bent over and kissed Harry. "I promise," he whispered, when he drew back enough to be able to speak, "I won't let that happen. Trust me?"

"Of course." The response was automatic, but it made Harry blink when he realized what he'd agreed to. Draco laughed again as he sighed.

"Can't hurt to go out and create pretty lights tomorrow," he said. "Or sing, Harry. I think more people would like to hear you sing than have."

"All right, all right," said Harry.

He heard a flap, and turned around. The bird clung to the wall, watching him with what Harry could have sworn was approval, before it turned and vanished through the wood again.

"This is embarrassing."

Draco ignored Harry. He had been saying some variation of that for the last ten minutes, as they walked out of the main quadrangle of buildings at Woodhouse and across the valley to find some place that wouldn't be too public for Harry, away from the sentries and the wizards practicing dueling under Adalrico Bulstrode and the karkadann, who had stopped grazing and pranced over to be petted when she saw Harry. Draco didn't care if it was embarrassing. Harry had promised that he would do it, and that meant he would do it.

Draco couldn't even describe what he'd felt since Harry's debacle with trying to give Camellia the absorbere gift. At least, he didn't think he could have described it to anyone else. He could speak the words in his own head, and they didn't sound silly or too sappy there, the way they would have if they were spoken aloud.

He felt lighter, as if he had been carrying a burden and finally been invited to lay it down. He felt more smug, more contented and surer of his place in Harry's life. He felt as if he stood a chance of being respected by other people out of Harry's shadow, whether or not he ever had magic to equal his, whether or not he managed to achieve deeds as heroic as his.

Harry had never thought of him as lesser. He had never believed that because Draco didn't have the same amount of magic, he was inferior in any way.

This changed things so much that Draco felt as if he stood on a mountaintop in the sight of the sun again, as before he made his decision to go to Harry instead of obey his father, but this time he could actually enjoy the view instead of being afraid of what others were thinking as they looked at him. Why should he be afraid of what

others were thinking as they looked at him? He was better than they were, and he knew it. He was judged as he deserved in the eyes of everyone who mattered to him.

And that wouldn't change once he encouraged Harry to give his magic the freedom and joy it wanted. It would only improve. Harry might actually be able to relax, as he rarely did except when he was moving fast, on a broom or a karkadann. And that would lead to his being more relaxed with Draco, and giving Draco more of what he wanted, including more sex.

Draco did not see any way in which his life wouldn't improve, based on what would happen this morning.

At last he thought they were far away enough from everyone for Harry to be not immediately embarrassed. He turned around with a coaxing smile and held out his hand to Harry. Harry looked at it suspiciously, as if Draco might somehow charm him into piping away like a songbird at the merest touch.

"Why don't you hold my hand while you sing?" Draco asked. "Touching me seems to calm you."

"I wouldn't call last night calm," Harry muttered, but he did as Draco asked. And then he stood there. And stood there. Draco watched him. It was a day nearly as bright as spring, though the chill in the air and the polished blue shell of the sky necessarily spoke of autumn. Harry shifted from foot to foot.

"Go ahead and sing," Draco said at last.

Harry closed his eyes, and a deep flush crept up his face. Then he drew his breath in and sang.

Draco found himself smiling immediately, and didn't try to stop it. At least Harry was making an honest attempt. This wasn't the mourning dirge he'd sung when Fawkes died, nor yet the music he'd used to heal the burned people lying in their own minds at Gollrish Y Thie. It wasn't even a battle song to improve morale. It was a chorus of gladness that gathered its legs beneath it and leaped straight up.

Draco heard the deep, contented purring that Harry's magic had given when he and Harry finally bedded each other after Harry woke from his Occlumency pools, and trails of blue and purple light, in deep, jeweled colors, unwound from his shoulders and looped around them both as Draco watched. The song went on flying, and the magic chased after it, creating fan patterns of flame. The flame was cold, though, and not at all the high, solemn joy a phoenix's fire might evoke. Instead, it formed pictures of gravely stalking birds—peacocks, herons, storks—only to the next moment turn them into falling showers of stars, like fireworks, and race madly about in a mixture of light and wind.

Harry's voice rose. Draco didn't know if he was getting lost in the song, or gaining more confidence. That was primarily because he couldn't look away from the light show in front of him. The light and the wind had now formed an owl-like pattern, white and golden-eyed in imitation of Hedwig, and were rotating it in circles—upright, to the left, upside-down, and to the right. Draco wondered what the motive was, then scolded himself. The motive was to have fun, of course.

He laughed, but he didn't think the magic was making him laugh, as the phoenix song after Midwinter had made him feel sorrow. His hand tightened on Harry's, and when the snowy owl dissolved into more brilliant chaos, he was able to sneak a sideways look at Harry's face.

Harry had his eyes open and was watching the displays his magic made with a half-dazed expression. He shook his head once or twice, but didn't stop singing. The magic giggled to itself and zipped up and down, then out to the sides, forming the pattern of a crossroads.

In moments, the crossroads pattern firmed into a golden one. Draco watched as each end began to glow with a ball of light, which shimmered and added colors until he had trouble looking directly at any of them. By now, everyone in Woodhouse might be staring, but Harry didn't seem inclined to end this, either the song or the light show.

The balls raced down each arm of the crossroads, rumbling all the way like boulders dropped into narrow tunnels. When the four of them

met in the center, they collided with a blaze Draco instinctively closed his eyes against, and which still flared like sunrise through his eyelids. A last, great chord of music went up, and Draco couldn't have said whether it came from the magic or Harry's throat.

Then the song dropped triumphantly back to earth, and was over.

Draco slowly opened his eyes and blinked away the afterimages. Then he looked at Harry—

Whose face was shining with wonder, who was touching his own throat as if he didn't know what to do with it, and whose magic filled his eyes and his body as if he were made of glass.

Draco took a swift step forward, seized Harry's head, and gave him a kiss that was half bite. No one could have blamed him for that, he was convinced. Hell, holding back on kissing Harry was probably a crime in most civilized countries.

Harry started to kiss back, and then became aware of their audience, the people pressing across the grass to stare at them. His cheeks flushed again, but he returned their stares and gave Draco a kiss only a bit less chaste than it would have been otherwise. Draco wished Harry had thought to Apparate them to their bedroom. Instead, Harry stepped away and nodded to those watching.

"What was that for?" Evergreen, the werewolf, asked. Draco gave him a sidelong glance. He thought Evergreen watched Harry too much. "What's the danger?"

"No danger," said Harry, even as his cheeks turned Weasley red. "I just wanted to have fun."

Draco smiled. Harry had had fun, whatever mortification he might feel now, and from the deep, contented rumbling Draco could hear if he listened, it seemed that his magic agreed.

Harry stretched his arms above his head and threw his shoulders back. They had finally brewed enough Wolfsbane for each werewolf in Woodhouse to take for all three nights they would transform, a little before the full moon actually rose on the first night. The packs had

already taken their Wolfsbane for tonight, of course, but Harry had been unsure if they would finish the brewing before tomorrow.

He glanced over at Snape, who was capping the vials of potion and putting them carefully in a large cabinet fastened to the wall of the room they'd taken over as their Potions lab (it had been the room where Harry worked on the werewolf cure, first). Harry narrowed his eyes. Snape's hands had the slightest shake to them, not something anyone would have noticed unless they knew him.

"Sir?" he asked. And there was the slightest pause before Snape answered, again something most people would not have noticed—but a pause that he might have used to conceal how badly Harry's question startled him.

"Yes, Harry?" he said, in a neutral tone.

"I'm going to spend part of the evening in the valley with the packs," Harry said. "But you'll have important brewing to do in your own rooms, of course."

Silence. Harry went on watching his guardian's turned back. He wondered if Snape had not thought he would offer him an out, or had simply committed himself to accompanying Harry outside, despite his own fear and hatred.

"Important brewing must not be neglected," Snape said softly.

Harry nearly sagged with relief. He could not have forced Snape to stay behind, and would never have tried, but the thought of what could have happened if Snape had been persistent...

"Of course it must not be, sir," he said, and moved towards the door.

"Harry?"

He paused again. He'd rarely heard Snape's voice sound so uncertain. He looked over his shoulder, but Snape still had his back turned. "Yes, Professor?"

“Why have you never sought permission to call me by my first name?” Snape was now trying to mask desperate curiosity as idle curiosity. Harry could not imagine why the answer would be so important to him, but he told the truth with all appropriate gravity.

“It seemed too informal, sir. Our first years, of course, we were professor and student—“

“That almost never prevented me from addressing you as Harry, instead of Mr. Potter.”

Harry blinked. “Yes, sir, but I assumed that you wanted to distinguish me from my brother. And our father,” he added, thinking of the black hatred that had burned between Snape and James even after Snape officially became his guardian.

“Yes,” Snape all but breathed the words. “And after I became your guardian, Harry?”

“It would have been inappropriate.” Harry cocked his head, wondering what Snape wanted from him. “You were there to defend me and protect me and restrict me when it was necessary. I did tell you that I wasn’t a child, sir, and you accepted that. So our relationship was as two adults most of the time. I admit there were days I behaved like a child, or a sulky adolescent, and you had to become the parent.” He smiled, and tried to add the smile to his tone, but since Snape still didn’t turn around, Harry wasn’t sure what effect that had on him. “But since then, you’ve never invited a closer acquaintance. I assumed it wasn’t allowable, sir, either for me or for yourself. You’re an intensely private person, I know, which is one of the reasons that talking to Joseph is so hard for you.”

Snape turned around then. “I consider myself your father, Harry. You know that, from the bargain we made.”

Harry nodded.

“And yet.”

Harry sighed. "I didn't know you wanted anything different, sir. And you know I've always been more comfortable with formality."

Snape spoke as if he were jumping off a cliff. "I would—appreciate it if you would call me Severus, Harry. For various reasons. I spent years hating the name and training myself not to think it. Severus was a weakling, and the man I became was not. But I am, I hope, eventually recovering the name from the memories I told Joseph about. Besides, you called your abusers by their first names. I would like at least that same level of intimacy."

"I assumed you wouldn't want equal standing with them in any way, sir," said Harry, his voice as careful as he could make it.

"This kind of standing? I do." Snape leaned forward, face intent. "You are my son, Harry, in ways that you were never theirs—not least of all because they never tried to claim you that way." A sneer entered his voice. Harry could see the effort it took him to force it back down. "I would not consider your treatment of me the same if you called me Severus," he finished at last, softly. "I would consider that you afforded me the same courtesy and friendliness that you show to Mrs. Malfoy and Mrs. Parkinson, in addressing them by their first names."

"Even that's new," Harry warned him. "And I stumble plenty of times."

Snape laughed, a sound half-genuine and half not. "And you believe that I am one to blast anyone for stumbling at this point, Harry?"

Harry nodded, slowly. He was still absolutely sure that this would end up cracked on the floor like an egg soon, but he could try. "Good night, s—Severus." The name felt odd on his tongue.

"Good night, Harry."

Then, he could finally leave and shut the door. Harry shook himself as he walked quickly up the narrow corridors and towards the exit from the wooden house into Woodhouse itself.

He could have understood it better if this had been something Joseph recommended Snape do, to help him recover. He would have

understood if Snape really had wanted to be considered at least equal to James and Lily in importance in Harry's mind.

But instinct told Harry that the most important reason was simply that Snape had wanted this, and wanted this from him.

It's so strange to think about Snape needing anything from anybody, he thought, as he pushed open the door. It's so strange to think about anybody wanting that from me, specifically, not just any child they've adopted. And Draco. I thought he wanted his pleasure most of all. And he wants my pleasure, too. And even my magic! It wants my delight in using it, not just use.

It was so strange. Harry felt as if he'd entered a new country, one that the Sanctuary hadn't prepared him for but which everyone else knew from early on in life. He was going to stumble so often. He just knew it. How in the world was he supposed to offer people things that came from him, and not common decency and compassion? How would he tread the line between doing something natural and good, and self-indulgence?

I don't know. I only know I have to try.

He put the thoughts away as he stepped out into Woodhouse. At least, he thought, here were werewolves who wanted nothing of him. A good thing, too, since Harry's own hope that matters would be resolved before the full moon had not come to pass. When they looked over the Minister's latest set of laws for the werewolves, Hawthorn had pointed out that there was no provision to punish the Aurors and others who had attacked werewolves while the hunting was still legal. There wasn't even a blunt statement that the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts was going to be disbanded, only that the funds would be used for something else and that no more hunting would be allowed. Harry had written Scrimgeour that morning explaining the problem. He hadn't heard anything back yet.

He tried to put the troubles in the back of his mind as he saw the valley.

Harry was very glad that Snape had stayed inside now. The moon had already risen. Woodhouse was packed with werewolves, the members of more than a dozen packs as well as those who had become werewolves because of Loki, nudging each other with their noses and sniffing and licking, or sitting on their haunches and staring at the moon.

Harry saw a flash of silver, and a moment later made out the wolf who must be Peregrine: a black bitch with an overwhelming presence, made more dramatic still by the silver-white markings along her shoulders and spine. She stood looking at the moon herself, then threw back her head and howled.

The wolves on either side of her, the remnants of her pack, responded instantly, and then other voices joined them, and others. Harry closed his eyes and listened. He could not call it a dirge, or a song of triumph. It didn't sound human enough for that. It was hunting music, but fiercer and freer and more savage than that heard from any human horn. This was what the packs must have sounded like when direwolves still ran the world, Harry thought, half-dreaming, shaggy beasts older than any werewolf, and hunting prey they had never seen.

When he opened his eyes, the howling had stopped and Peregrine was guiding the others on a run around the rim of the valley, beginning with the entrance near the pine woods and continuing on past the hills and the houses. Harry found it hard to see them, given that the only light was that of the full moon, but that didn't matter. The moonlight was just right for seeing them, he thought, the flashes of silver on Peregrine's shoulders leading the way and the fawn and white and brindled and gray and sometimes black coats pouring after her. Sometimes a gleam marked a mouth of bared teeth or a pair of amber eyes catching the moon just right. Soon Harry stood near the side of the widening ring, and no matter how fast he turned, he couldn't keep up with them all.

He saw no werewolf as pale as Loki, and for that he was grateful. He tried not to think about what Loki was probably doing in France at the moment, and failed.

Twice the wolves made a circuit of the valley, and then gradually they slowed, panting heavily and turning the game into more individual ones, snatching at and playing with each other. Harry couldn't tell if they were splitting up by packs or not, since he found it hard to recognize most of them in wolf form. He did notice Remus tussling with Camellia, who bit him sharply on the nose and loped off to stand by herself. She still hadn't recovered completely from the loss of her magic.

Then a dirge arose.

Harry turned, the hair on the back of his neck rising. A pale fawn bitch stood by herself, head tilted back and voice rising and falling in an ululating wail. Harry wouldn't have felt so bad if he didn't know who it was. Hawthorn.

Slowly, though his skin prickled all over with sweat and shock, he moved towards her. The other werewolves made no move to follow him. Harry wondered if that was because Hawthorn was part of no pack.

He whispered her name, halting near her. She stopped her howl and stared at him with sorrowful amber eyes.

He whispered her name several more times, but of course she couldn't speak in this form, and she wouldn't consent to nuzzle his hand or take comfort from him. She moved away and lay down, curling her tail around her nose. Harry heard the other werewolves turn back to their games. He sat down next to her, talking softly.

"I do think the werewolf cure can be perfected," he said. "Perhaps some research into the origins of the curse would help. Thomas said it might have originated in America, of all places, and I wonder—"

He paused, his earlier thought about direwolves catching up to him. Direwolves had lived in America, hadn't they? And he didn't know if they had looked like werewolves, but there might still be some connection between that shape and the fact that werewolves looked so different from normal wolves.

He stood, intending to take his insight to Thomas and ask if it might help, but just then Hawthorn howled mightily and jumped to her feet, speeding past him. Harry whirled. Running to meet Hawthorn was a distinctive golden werewolf—Delilah Gloryflower, the war witch and another of Fenrir Greyback’s victims. Her coat was apparently not supposed to mimic her blonde hair that closely, but someone had forgotten to tell that to her magic.

And close behind her was her aunt, Laura Gloryflower. She must have Apparated Delilah with her, Harry thought. Since they’d approached without hostile intent, Woodhouse had let them in.

He went to greet her, wondering what was wrong. Delilah and Hawthorn were nudging each other and making low whimpering sounds in their throats that he didn’t like, but it might only be the relief of packmates reunited.

Laura’s face told him it was not, though.

“Gloriana Griffinsnest found out that Claudia was a werewolf,” she said quietly. Harry nodded; Claudia was the third member of Delilah’s and Hawthorn’s little pack. He wondered if Gloriana had imprisoned Claudia, and what they would have to do to get her back.

“She killed her,” Laura said.

Harry froze. Then he whispered, “What?”

“You heard me,” said Laura, vicious in a way that Harry had never seen her. Her face had a halo of fur around it, and fangs were growing in her mouth. Of course, she was puellaris, able to turn into a lioness to defend her children, and Delilah was her niece. “Gloriana killed Claudia. She is dead.” She stopped, as if she wanted to say no more, but then pushed ahead. “And she believes that she will have no trouble from the Ministry—I heard her say this the other day—because many of the pureblood witches and wizards cannot believe they value the lives of werewolves as much as those of ordinary witches and wizards.”

Harry felt as if the world were spinning around him, and he felt weirdly calm.

He met Laura's eyes. He saw her take a step back at whatever she recognized in his face.

"I suggest that we make the Ministry step up, and prove that they do," Harry said.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: On the Eve of Revolution

"But there is nothing we can do," said Draco in a calm, reasonable voice. "You have to understand that, Harry. Since you disagreed with the latest set of werewolf laws that Scrimgeour sent, then what Mrs. Griffinsnest did is still not illegal."

"It's not legal, either," said Harry, not looking up from the letter he was writing. "The Ministry repealed the werewolf hunting season, remember? So right now, one could argue that it's not legal or illegal to kill werewolves."

"That's strange," said Draco.

Harry nodded. "I agree. But that doesn't mean I have to simply say that it's strange, and sit back to hope the Ministry punishes Gloriana. I want to make it clear to Scrimgeour that this is going to require more action."

"And if he can't do that?" Draco asked. "If he finds his hands bound? He's given you so much already, Harry. The Wizengamot must be nearing the end of its patience with him, and with you."

Harry whirled around. Draco's face went pale as he looked at him. Harry guessed that his magic had altered the look of his face or his eyes; it would explain Laura's reaction, too. Harry held Draco's gaze and murmured, "I know what I'm going to do if Scrimgeour doesn't respond. I have countermeasures in place. But it would be useless to upset all the Ministry's delicate work if Scrimgeour is going to arrest Gloriana anyway. I'm writing him." He nodded at his letter. "And if he doesn't do anything, then it's revolution, and not rebellion, he wins."

"For one werewolf?" Draco asked.

"Yes." Laura had told him how it had been. She usually spent the full moon nights with Delilah. When Delilah had begun to howl and paw at the ground, then grabbed her arm and tried to pull her out the door, Laura had Apparated first to the Griffinsnest home, thinking that something might have happened to her niece's packmate. She had

found Gloriana drawing silver knives out of Claudia. It was not murder, to hear her describe it, but butchery.

Claudia was someone Harry hadn't managed to protect, either. He should have insisted that she come to Woodhouse, even though the reason she had remained still in the first place was to prevent the mad lycanthrope-haters in her family from finding out she was a werewolf. And she had been his ally, not a werewolf hunter who had appealed to him for protection when he couldn't run anymore.

She had depended on him, looked to him—if not as alpha, as defender. She had helped him in the original attack on Woodhouse a year ago. She had come to Hawthorn when Hawthorn so badly needed her comfort after the Midsummer battle. Harry had sent her Wolfsbane.

And now she was dead, and the rage in him was screaming like a trapped and cornered thing, the way he thought Claudia might have screamed when she was cut apart. Or would she have gone to her death with more dignity than that? Even when Fenrir Greyback's bite had ripped off her right ear and left her with a huge scar across her face, Claudia had been mostly silent, Laura said, and tended not to complain about her loss.

That Gloriana had also helped him with information about accepted werewolves made no never mind. She had turned on her own relative, her own blood. She had done it when she had to know that Claudia would be reluctant to fight back; she had Wolfsbane, so she wasn't a savage monster, and even if she only wounded Gloriana, she would still infect her with lycanthropy. What Gloriana had done was so far from justice that it only added to the building scream in Harry's head.

He attached the letter to Hedwig's leg. The snowy owl was awake, of course, since it was night, and she had fluttered over to his shoulder at once when he entered the bedroom, as if she knew this would be important. She looked at him now, and Harry stared back into her golden eyes. He wondered if Claudia's eyes had shone like that before she died, if she had tried a desperate gaze to make Gloriana understand.

“Minister Scrimgeour, girl,” he whispered.

Hedwig rose like a white shadow and drifted through the window. Harry took a deep breath and laid his head down on the desk for a moment. Draco’s hand brushed his shoulder once, hesitantly, as though questioning whether he wanted to be touched, and then withdrew.

“And what are you going to do if this doesn’t work?” Draco asked softly.

“That’s my contingency plan,” said Harry, and grabbed another piece of parchment. He could feel his mind crystallizing, his memory pulling up the Daily Prophet articles he’d read over the last few weeks, and even before that, during August and September. A list of names unscrolled past his eyes. The names at the forefront of that list weren’t Light pureblood wizards, but most of their allies were.

Like Gloriana Griffinsnest. And Laura had said that many of the pureblood witches and wizards believed that the Ministry did not value werewolves’ lives as much as theirs. That meant they might have heard Gloriana bragging about her werewolf kills, or expressing attitudes that would mean she intended to murder any werewolf who appeared in her vicinity, family member or not. They could know damning evidence. They could cast her into the Ministry’s jaws.

If they had some reason to do so.

Harry would give them a reason to do so. The Light pureblood wizards had largely fallen from grace after the accusations of child abuse on the part of their leader came out, and the few Light pureblood wizards in Harry’s inner circle were not enough to convince them they had similar standing with his Dark allies. He knew they had lost influence at the Ministry, if only because Lucius and other Dark wizards had regained theirs.

And now his break with Lucius was going to help him, help him most wonderfully.

Fear of werewolves might have begun this killing, but it would not end it—not if Harry had anything to say about it. He would not simply intimidate people into accepting equal rights for werewolves. He had seen how shaky a basis for any kind of lasting conviction terror was, how it could turn around and bite those who had begun it. He would use the much safer pillars of self-interest and ambition to build his house on.

Fling a rope to the Light pureblood wizards, promise to try to use his political influence to help them regain theirs, and they would be more willing to support things like rights for werewolves and the Goblin Board. Those were the broader goals.

And also smaller ones, a personal gift for a personal gift. The personal gift Harry wanted was Gloriana Griffinsnest, and enough evidence to try her fairly.

The personal gift the Light pureblood wizards wanted was some form of control over him.

He could give that to them.

His letter began, Dear Aurora Whitestag.

Rufus put Harry's letter down slowly, feeling sick. Hedwig had flown straight to his office to find him. He had stayed at the Ministry that night, falling asleep over some paperwork, but he had no doubt the snowy owl would have flown to his house if she had to.

A murder. A murder that could break or make the Ministry's stance on this, that could provide a rallying point for their enemies or a rallying point for their own side. And Rufus knew what the Wizengamot, especially the Elders who were chafing under his control, would do once they heard of this. He might control all the magic in the Ministry, but he did not control their minds or their free wills. And they would run like mad to the first person who claimed that what Gloriana Griffinsnest did was not wrong, because that would mean they could start working to say that the new laws were unjustified and werewolves should be restricted once more.

Rufus had thought he had climbed safely on wings of power above the sea of chaos. He should have known that it would reach up and drown him sooner or later.

He knew there was no way he could agree to Harry's request. The laws bound him. Werewolf hunting was illegal now, but provisions to try anyone who killed a werewolf as they would for any other murder were not yet legal. And Mrs. Griffinsnest would surely argue that, as well as arguing that she had no idea the dead werewolf might not attack her; she had been living in her house for months, after all, disguised as a human, and could have had some nefarious plan. If she wanted to be honest, why not admit her lycanthropy?

What would Harry's response to that be? In his letter, he only spoke of a contingency plan. Rufus didn't know what it was. All-out war? Leaning on his Dark allies until the Ministry crumbled and did what he wanted? Refusing reconciliation until a trial date was set?

Rufus simply didn't know.

"Sir?"

Rufus looked up. Percy had stayed with him, and been awakened by Hedwig's fluttering arrival. Now, though, he stood by the hearth, staring into it.

"Someone's trying to establish a Floo connection, sir," he said. "Should I let them through?"

Rufus sat up. He didn't think it could be Harry, because Harry wouldn't have sent a letter if he intended to firecall, but he would bet Galleons to Knuts that it was related. "Do so," he said, with a nod, and Percy tapped the hearth with his wand and then stepped back out of the way. Rufus hoped vaguely that he looked presentable. Falling asleep over one's desk was a marvelous way to get ink smeared on one's cheek, but not much else.

The face that appeared in the flames was one of the last he expected. "Mrs. Whitestag," he said, and tried to keep his voice simply cold, without any of the massive irritation that arose the moment he saw

her. This was the last time of night that he wanted to talk about the bloody monitoring board, which she had tried to insert into their conversation after his speech the other day. "Can I do something for you?"

"Minister," said Whitestag simply, and smiled at him. She held up a piece of parchment. Rufus squinted, but couldn't make out what was written on it through the green-tinged flames. "I came to say that we have heard of your recent difficulties, and you need not worry. We can give you all the evidence that you need to convict Gloriana Griffinsnest of wrongful, premeditated murder."

Rufus stopped breathing, literally. Percy had to pound him on the back. He let out a great whoop of air, wished Whitestag hadn't been watching, and leaned forward to stare. "And why would you be willing to do that, ma'am?" His mind was racing. He knew Whitestag was undeclared, without allegiance to either Light or Dark, though she had been working with the Light purebloods, the ones with the most reason to want Harry bound and controlled. And some Light purebloods had supported the anti-werewolf laws as well, because most of the officials in the Ministry supporting them were of the Light, and because they seemed to believe they had to achieve power any way they could against the Dark and its creatures. He knew of no reason that they would agree to turn their backs on Mrs. Griffinsnest, a woman who had only done what most of them talked about and wished they had the courage to do.

"Because," said Whitestag, with another shake of the parchment she held, "Harry vates has seen sense. He has acknowledged that, for all that he named his organization the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, he has had very little to do with the Light of late. He invites more Light wizards to come to his side. He says that he understands how it would look like he was wild and uncontrolled, or at best in the control of the Dark, since so many of the Dozen Who Died were children of Light pureblood families. He says that he has broken with Lucius Malfoy." She paused and looked at him inquiringly.

Rufus half-closed his eyes, thinking of Lucius's pale face in Courtroom Ten. It would pale further when he heard of this, Rufus was certain. Lucius had disowned his son and refused to support

Harry's rebellion, unless lifting Rufus to dictator of the Ministry could be counted as supporting it, but Rufus had been sure he meant to regain his place at Harry's side eventually. If Harry was publicly announcing a break with him, Rufus did not see how that could happen.

"That is true," he had to say. "Lucius Malfoy disowned his son Draco, Harry's courting partner in a joining ritual." He could not say much more than that, because the Unbreakable Vow he'd sworn in Courtroom Ten would not let him betray Lucius, but Whitestag didn't seem to need more than that. She only looked happy.

"And Harry has accepted the monitoring board," she went on, her voice swelling with triumph.

"He cannot," said Rufus, before he thought. "He is vates. How could he accept a set of such close restrictions on his movements?"

"Oh, we don't mean to be restrictions," said Whitestag instantly. "That was my intention when I began to circulate the idea of the board, I admit, and had not studied the situation more closely. But I have read what a vates is, Minister, and I will say now that what I originally intended would be impossible. Harry must be free to consult his own conscience and do what it says. We simply mean to be a set of voices for the Light, as his closest allies are already a set of voices for the Dark. He carries the shadows with him. We will be the sun." She smiled. "We mean to swear the oaths for the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. There are a few who won't agree, I know, but most who supported the monitoring board will."

Because they listen to you, Rufus thought. Whitestag was their leader, the one who had hammered them into a united force and could get them to do what she said with a flick of her eyebrow or a lift of her finger. It rather reminded Rufus of a werewolf pack. Whitestag led not because she was the most magically powerful, as Dumbledore had led the Order of the Phoenix, but because she was the cleverest and had a charisma none of the others could match. And she was the reasonable face, where for so long Philip Willoughby had been the face of the grieving parent. Her interviews in the Daily Prophet had

always come across as rational, the words of a woman able to adapt to changes and accept new information as she found it.

Rufus had simply not realized that was true, that Whitestag would happily compromise and accept some lesser version of what she had wanted in the beginning for the sake of having something at all.

She's not a fanatic, she's a politician, and I was wrong to underestimate her.

"So you believe that Harry has agreed to this of his own free will?" he questioned heavily.

Whitestag laughed. "I would like to see who could impersonate the vates and get away with it, or make an offer in his name that was not sincere! Yes, Minister, I do. He wants Gloriana Griffinsnest brought to justice. Who would not? She murdered an ally of his."

"With the state of the laws, that may not be possible," Rufus warned her.

Whitestag smiled. "Minister, think for a moment about the allegiance of those who will most heartily protest a fair trial—well, those who would have, this morning."

Rufus thought. Erasmus, Juniper, Gregorian, Kildain—

All of the Light.

Whitestag closed her left eye in a slow wink as she saw him catch on. "This isn't just a bargain to support werewolves or give us our monitoring board, Minister," she said quietly. "This is a bargain to bring the Light back to power, to equal standing with the Dark. It unites the major lines of force in the Ministry, the reasonable Light purebloods, the reasonable Dark purebloods, and Harry vates. The fanatics will be left out in the cold. Juniper, for instance, might not vote for this, because he hates werewolves. But that doesn't matter. The central elements are coming together, and we can save justice, equal rights for werewolves, and the reputation of the Light, so badly

scratched and scarred and stained by the actions of Albus Dumbledore. We can save your term in office, Minister.”

“You are undeclared,” said Rufus. “I fail to see why this makes you so happy, Mrs. Whitestag.”

“I can rejoice for my allies, can I not?” Whitestag’s large dark eyes were guileless as they met his. “And I have what I want,” she ended, in a softer tone. “So, Minister. Summon the Wizengamot. Tell them of this outrage. Tell them of the compromise we are establishing. Encourage them to pass the new laws now. Harry has said that he will agree to the last set of terms that you sent him, because he trusts the Ministry to do the right thing and punish a murder committed after werewolf killing was made illegal.”

“It was not—” said Rufus, and stopped.

“Exactly,” said Whitestag. “The Wizengamot was meeting in the middle of the night. This is urgent, sir, so urgent. Who can say at what hour the laws passed, before or after the murder was committed? In truth, sir, the Wizengamot had already agreed to offer this set of terms to Harry; the Daily Prophet will record that, given that you sent a copy of the documents to them. What rendered that offer useless was Harry’s refusal. And he has changed his mind now.”

Rufus breathed through his teeth. He could refuse, after all. He could say this was immoral, trying Gloriana Griffinsnest for something that had not been illegal when she did it. He could refuse to summon the Wizengamot.

But murdering a werewolf was not legal, either, and had not been since the edict about the hunting season was repealed more than two weeks ago. And neither was murder moral. And hadn’t he plunged into dark waters already, with the Ritual of Cinnabrus and the lies that protected it? If he needed a clear conscience, he should have persuaded sixteen Wizengamot members to vote for him, not taken the first sixteen people who showed up and guarded what they did with lies and secrets and Oblivates.

How could he say that this, with one more lie, was worse?

Rufus bowed his head. "You are certain," he asked, one more time, "that Harry made this decision of his own free will?"

"Let me read you the last paragraph of his letter." Whitestag held the parchment up. "I know that there are some who will question my sincerity on this point, or argue that I am acting out of vengeance and misguided rage. To them I say: I am vates. I knew before I began to walk this path that there are thorns among the roses, and that stepping on the free wills of others would cost me. I have stepped on the free wills of others before this, because I know it was not the Minister's will that I break into Tullianum, nor all the werewolves' will to be forced into coming to Woodhouse as the best alternative to dying. A rebel cannot help but defy the common will. I am trying to correct that now. I will not give up what I have fought so long and so hard for, but I can try to reach out and respect the free wills of people I considered enemies, if they agree not to be enemies any longer, and I can take on oaths. If I swear an oath, I do so by my own free will. If I wear a collar, I choose to put that collar on my neck myself."

Rufus could think of times when Harry had done that, including his oath to defend the werewolves and his attempt to work with Rufus on the matter of the Unspeakables, instead of breaking into open rebellion at the first sign of trouble. He had put off revolution as long as he could. And now he was offering to pursue that revolution through legal means as much as possible.

Rufus might question Harry's motives for this, but it was true that it was absolutely Harry's choice to agree to the monitoring board, if that was what he really wanted.

You can have a mildly clean conscience—and even then, you would be letting a murderer escape and Harry do Merlin knows what next, which might result in more deaths—or you can accept one more lie and make it truth.

"I am going to summon the Wizengamot," he said.

Whitestag smiled at him, and gave a little bow. "This has been a night for seeing sense," she said. "Until we meet again, Minister."

The flames flared and died. Rufus rose and walked towards the door of his office, hearing Percy's light footsteps at his back.

"Sir?"

Rufus turned around and looked at Percy, almost hoping for some condemnation. Percy would have the right. He had been part of the Ritual of Cincinnatus, and if he thought things had gone too far and it was costing too much to do what they wanted to do, then Rufus needed to hear it.

But Percy's face shone with admiration instead. "Sir," he said, and then stopped, and then said, "Sir. You're upholding the spirit of the law, not the letter. I find that much better than the other way around."

Rufus gave a jerky little nod, then opened his office door. The dozing Aurors on either side of the door, Rags and Hope, stood up straight and turned to look at him.

"We're going to Courtroom Ten," said Rufus, and began walking fast enough that they hurried to keep up with him. He felt Percy's stare on his back, and knew it did not judge. He would have to be the judge of himself.

There is no right answer, is there? I would feel just as many qualms if I turned Whitestag down and insisted on not trying Griffinsnest.

I suppose this is something Harry and I have in common: trying as best we can to do what's right, with the wrong always mixed in with it. I suppose Harry's known that since he killed those children. The ability to say "this is absolutely right" belongs to other people.

Harry felt as if he had a bad case of sanity. The anger that had stalked whirling around his skull at first had left him as soon as he wrote the letter to Aurora Whitestag, or perhaps simply dived under the surface of his mind and started brooding on its time to reemerge. He had been able to see what would happen next as if the bird were showing him images.

And, sure enough, those things had happened. Or, at least, two of them, the ones concerning Draco and Snape, had.

Draco had read the letter to Whitestag over his shoulder. There had been no way that Harry could hide what he was doing from Draco, and he rather preferred not to try. Draco had kept quiet while Harry sent the letter off with a barn owl, but then he'd loosened his tongue.

"And you're going to accept this monitoring board, Harry? Are you mad?"

"No," said Harry. He leaned against the wall of their bedroom and watched Draco. He'd awakened him when he came in and started writing the letter, but he didn't think that mattered. Neither of them could have gone to sleep at this point. Draco's eyes were wide with anger and his face was pale, and Harry could feel his anger turning around and around in the depths of his mind. It really had just dived, and it had claws and fangs, and it wanted to come out. Harry shut the trapdoor on it and watched Draco. "It's part of what must be done. If the Light purebloods wanted something else of me, then I would give them something else. This is what they want. I'm lucky, in a way, that they want this so badly that they're willing to fall in behind Aurora Whitestag."

"She doesn't lead anyone that important," said Draco dismissively. "Just that group of parents who want justice for their 'murdered' children—"

"They were murdered," Harry said, and heard the growl in his voice, and shut the trapdoor again. Pace, pace, pace, his anger went. "Whether you think Voldemort did it or I did, they were murdered."

"Mercy-killed," Draco said.

Harry shrugged. "Have you been reading the papers, Draco? Maybe it isn't as noticeable, under the discussion of the new werewolf laws, but there's always a reference somewhere, if only in a paragraph, to Aurora Whitestag and what she wants. I think she's like your mum, in some ways—she's got the political connections and the persuasive powers, even if she isn't officially Declared for Light herself. A lot of

the Light purebloods will listen to her. Offer them a more balanced political Quidditch pitch along with the monitoring board, and they'll take this." I think. I hope. Harry did not like to imagine what his vates commitment and his oath to defend the werewolves might drive him to do if the Light purebloods did not accept this.

"So she might lead them," said Draco. "But it's still sacrificing part of your freedom to them."

"Part of it," said Harry. "They have to know that I'm not going to do exactly what they want; part of the bargain is their supporting werewolf rights, after all, so I'm not trading them everything for Gloriana Griffinsnest. I'm building a coalition, Draco. That means compromises on our side."

"So far," said Draco coldly, "I can't see that anyone other than you compromises."

"The werewolves have had to compromise enough," said Harry. "And the goblins, and the centaurs. And I'm not going to let the Dark wizards who've been such faithful allies to me suffer, unless they make political moves totally unrelated to the Alliance and the Light wizards make opposite ones. There's not much I can do about that, because that would be stepping on someone else's free will, too."

"So sacrifices are all right, as long as they come from you?" Draco's voice was acid now.

"I choose to make them." Harry looked steadily at him. "Did you think we could get through this without sacrifices? Even you made one. You made one of the greatest ones here, Draco, private and personal though it was. You gave up your father and his approval for me. Did you think that was the last?"

"You've given up too much already!" Draco's voice rose. "I chose to give up that wanker's approval, Harry, but you—"

"Are choosing this."

Draco fell silent, but he was still visibly seething. Harry held his eyes in a gentle gaze and shrugged.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “This is the price they wanted. This is the price I chose to pay. Personally, I doubt they’ll push that much, because they have to have known there are few other circumstances in which I would agree to the monitoring board at all. We’ll meet in the middle and work out something that appeals to both sides.”

“Both sides of what?”

Harry looked up. Snape had come through the door, his narrow gaze going from Harry to Draco. Someone must have told him about Claudia’s murder, Harry thought. He wondered idly if Snape had emerged from his room when he heard the collective howls of the werewolves or Laura’s swearing, or if Laura had fetched him. Harry could see her doing that. She would think that he needed a parent right now.

“Harry sent a letter to Whitestag, sir,” said Draco, before Harry could say anything. “And other Light wizards. Offering them a coalition if they would help him bring down Gloriana Griffinsnest and support werewolf rights. And he accepted that monitoring board they wanted him to have.”

Snape turned and glared incredulously at Harry. Harry looked straight back. He was not as tall as Snape and never would be, but right now he didn’t have to be. The rage paced around its cell in his mind and snarled and snarled and snarled, and Harry knew he had to be strong enough to make decisions without its influence. He was so tempted to go to Gloriana Griffinsnest himself and rip her life away from her, and he knew he had to resist that temptation. That way lay stepping off his vates path.

“And you promised that you would try to act as a son to me,” Snape whispered.

Harry staggered. It honestly hadn’t occurred to him that Snape would take it that way. He wondered if Draco had thought about it, and if that was why he had included the mention of the monitoring board.

Stop it, he told himself then. Some paranoia is fine, but you can't live if you distrust the people close to you that much.

"I did promise that, sir," he said. "And I can assure you that I would never allow the monitoring board to have guardianship over me, nor to take me away from you. I would break all the agreements before that would happen. You're too important to me."

"I do not understand why you agreed to this in the first place," said Snape. His voice was a little louder now. Good, Harry thought. He found the whisper hard to cope with. It reminded him of what his own father might have sounded like, if James was ever that disappointed in something Harry had done, as opposed to something Harry had done to hurt him or Lily. "You must know that they will press, finding places where they can take more from you, using your own psychology of sacrifice against you."

"I don't think they will, sir," said Harry. "And if they try, then I'll push back, because I know it would be hurting you."

"Not because it would be hurting you."

Harry gave a short laugh. "You can't have it both ways, sir. Who does this hurt more, me or you? Are you trying to make me feel guilty for being selfish, or are you saying that I should be more selfish?"

"I am saying that you should think about yourself before the wants of Light pureblood wizards," said Snape, "allies or not."

"A purely selfish life has been impossible for me since my mother trained me," said Harry flatly, and shrugged. "If that training makes it easier for me to accept the inevitable political compromises, this is one time I'll take that."

Snape stood looking into his eyes. Harry looked back, and when Snape's Legilimency reached out to him, with a tentativeness that showed he was free to reject it and hide behind his Occlumency shields, Harry let it in, and showed Snape the caged fury, the process he'd gone through while thinking of what would probably happen with

the Ministry and what he thought was likely to happen with the Light pureblood wizards, what he would allow the monitoring board to do and what he would not allow it to do.

"It's my choice if I bind myself," he said quietly, shutting his shields at last. Letting Snape see that much was his decision. Letting him see more was not. "And no one can say that is wrong."

Snape turned and simply left, shutting the door behind him. Harry doubted it was the last discussion they would have on the subject. Harry turned to Draco, who was staring at him with shadows behind his eyes.

"I did choose this," Harry insisted. "I did."

"It's still a sacrifice," Draco whispered.

Harry shook his head. "By that logic, so is everything."

He turned restlessly away. Then he paused as he saw a barn owl skimming towards the window. He went over and held out his hand, and the owl alighted on his arm. It carried an envelope with the seal of a leaping stag on it, and when Harry broke it open and read the letter inside, he could feel a smile widening across his face.

"What is it?" Draco demanded, crowding towards him.

Harry held up the letter. "She agreed," he said simply. "So did her allies. So did Scrimgeour."

He could feel something like peace welling across his soul, soothing the caged fury in his mind at last. No, I won't have everything I want, but I'll have the justice and the freedom that my allies need and deserve. That is more than enough.

Rufus surveyed the gathered members of the Wizengamot. Most of them were still yawning and bleary-eyed, but he met a few sharp gazes: Griselda Marchbanks, of course. Most of the people they had Obliviated and managed to persuade further to their side after that. Elder Juniper, damn him, frowning and folding his arms. Amelia

Bones, but she was sharp-eyed the way a rabbit had to be, Rufus thought, watching out for its next predator closing the distance.

He began the way he had thought he would, telling them flatly about the murder of Claudia Griffinsnest, and then interweaving the promise of more political power for the Light with the promise of the rebellion ending, and the situation that made them look a laughingstock in the eyes of other wizarding governments finally resolved. Juniper's face darkened into a scowl as he listened, but others sat up and leaned forward. Even Amelia finally wore an expression that was not terror for the first time since the Wizengamot had gathered after the Ritual of Cincinnatus.

"As part of the bargain, Harry vates has agreed to accept a monitoring board," Rufus said. "I know that some of its members will be parents of the Dozen Who Died, but not all. There must be some Wizengamot Elders as well." He glanced at Griselda. "Madam Marchbanks, Mrs. Whitestag at one time told me that you had agreed to participate in this project."

"I did." Griselda's voice was strong and confident, but Rufus could see the doubt in her eyes. She might have agreed to sit on the board when she thought it was the best solution to the debacle between the goblins' vates and the rest of the wizarding world, but now that her friends were getting what they wanted, Rufus wondered if she regretted that decision.

"It will ease my conscience to know that you are part of this," said Rufus. "I would not have endorsed it if Harry vates himself had not chosen it." And even now I do not think it the best solution, he could have said, but he kept that part to himself. He scanned the rows of seats in the gallery. Even single member of the Wizengamot was there. That was good. No one could complain later they'd been left out of this, or didn't know what it was about. "It is certainly true that, commitment to free will or not, Harry vates is still very young, and he may have made different decisions if he had had adult guidance and counsel from both Light and Dark wizards, not only Dark. He has the Gloryflowers on his side, and the Opallines, and the Starrise heir, but they are the only Light families who have truly agreed to the Alliance

of Sun and Shadow. Harry is also sadly lacking in Muggleborn and halfblood support, though he is a halfblood himself and his Alliance claims to represent them both. But we have all kinds of wizards here, and perhaps we can make the decision now and insure that Harry receives the guidance he needs and his group becomes more representative. What do the rest of the Elders say? Should we lay our power behind this?" He paused, and when no one immediately said anything, added, "We shall put it to a vote. Elder Juniper."

Juniper was quiet, thinking. Rufus could almost see him weighing the advantages of Light being able to fight Dark with the fact that it would involve voting for werewolf rights.

But Juniper had already dissented, simply refusing to vote, on the new laws the Wizengamot had passed. And perhaps he realized, or thought, that it wouldn't really matter what he said; Gloriana Griffinsnest was still likely to be tried.

"I agree," he said.

Rufus fought the temptation to close his eyes, and moved on from there. A few Elders abstained. Most accepted eagerly, almost all of them Light-devoted or Light-Declared. A few Elders voted against it, surprising Rufus; he had thought they would be content, as they had been supporters of the werewolf laws. Griselda, of course, supported it.

When that finished, with strong support for accepting Harry's compromise, Rufus nodded sharply. "Thank you, sirs, madams. I will ask that if you wish to be considered for membership in the monitoring board, you contact Harry vates, Aurora Whitestag, or our own Madam Marchbanks; I had no hand in coming up with the idea, or urging Harry to accept it." It was as much as he felt able to distance himself from this. "I will be available after this meeting in my office, however, should anyone wish to speak with me."

He did have to talk with a few people on his way out, among them Elder Juniper. The other wizard was smiling in an odd way as he faced Rufus and made a little bow with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Well-danced,” he said.

“I am not sure I understand you, sir,” said Rufus stiffly. Juniper was only a few years older than he was, but with a lift of an eyebrow, he could make Rufus feel like a seventh-year Slytherin caught snogging his girlfriend in the rose garden. Albus Dumbledore had once had the same effect on him.

“You took steps that must be painful for you, and never missed a one.” Juniper’s gaze strayed to his bad leg. “I would never have imagined that someone with such a wound could cope so well.”

He bowed again, and wandered away. Rufus sighed, though under his breath, and wondered if his discomfort was going to be so visible to everyone.

He hoped not. He had received most of what he wanted, and that would have to be enough. If he thought Harry was making too many sacrifices, he would have to be patient, and watch, and interfere where he felt able to do so.

One of the Light Elders was tugging on his arm now, wanting to know something about the makeup of the monitoring board. Rufus turned to tell her to go talk to Griselda, and wondered what the morning would bring.

Intermission: Back Into the Storm of Ravens

Snape stepped into the throne room a half hour after Voldemort had called his other Death Eaters. All the muted conversation among them immediately stopped. Masked faces turned towards him, and then no one moved. Snape wondered, with an amusement that was buried deep under the shields he had piled on his mind—shields woven of both Occlumency and the coldness that his mother had taught him as part of survival—whether they had expected him to run, as other Death Eaters did when they decided they did not belong to their Lord anymore.

But Snape would not run. How could he? No matter where he went, he bore a brand on his arm that would identify him at once. So he was made to kneel at the feet of the dark throne, by his own choice. What had changed were the amount of control he had over his mind, and the amount of foresight that he was using to predict his future, and the consequences of failure.

Those supposedly minor changes would give him more freedom than any of the kneeling fools now contemplated. Snape supposed he would feel a distant pity for them, too, if emotions were now part of his regular mental carriage.

“Severus.”

The Dark Lord was speaking to him. Well-trained reflex made Snape drop to one knee and bow his head. “My Lord,” he murmured.

“You know that you will be punished.” Voldemort’s voice was almost friendly. That didn’t fool Snape. He had heard this tone before, and the Dark Lord used it only when he was about to go into one of his deepest rages. “You did not come when I summoned you. You know that no excuses are sufficient for this.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Snape, and kept his head bowed. Inside, far behind his shields, he was laughing. Inside, he was free. His mind had become a haven full of ice scorpions, and all his weaknesses were frozen. Voldemort would never know how little it had cost him. Snape did not plan on telling him.

“Lucius. Bellatrix. Regulus.” Voldemort’s voice as he spoke the names was sharp, resonant, a voice Snape had not heard before. “You will stay. Others of my children, depart.”

The other Death Eaters did not have to be told twice. They all but ran from the room. Snape remained kneeling where he was, his eyes on the floor, and yet he knew what would be happening behind him, because he knew all of the three Voldemort had invited to remain so well.

Lucius would be taking off his mask, so as to display his perfectly composed face to his master; what mattered most to him was not the reality but the show. Bellatrix would be leaning forward, her black eyes liquid and intent as a hunting panther’s. She loved the torture of disgraced Death Eaters, and often complained that her Lord did not punish enough of them.

Regulus would be struggling against letting his face pale or his eyes fall, even as he pulled off his mask. Voldemort had chosen him because Snape and Regulus were close, and he knew that. So this was a test of Regulus’s loyalty as well as Snape’s own. If he made a single gesture in an attempt to restrain the Dark Lord, then he would be placed under torture as well.

Snape hoped that Regulus would hold firm, but he couldn’t do much about it if Regulus chose not to. What he could do was kneel with his eyes on the floor, and accept the torture that came with his supposed betrayal, and decide to survive it.

He knew that most of the disgraced Death Eaters died. Everyone knew that. But the fact was only one of many icy stones in his mind, such as the part that counted how soon he might reasonably slip away to Dumbledore with a report on the Dark Lord’s activities. It was not any more important than they were.

Voldemort spelled the door shut with wandless magic. Snape was unimpressed, in the haven of his deepest self. He could have done the same thing if he wished to, and was truly angry.

“Let us see what a little pain may teach you about loyalty, Severus,” Voldemort whispered, a sound hardly louder than Nagini’s scales on stone, pointing that long yew wand at him. “Obscurus.”

And his eyesight was gone. Snape gave a little flinch at that, because he knew it was expected. There was another way to see his mind, he thought, beyond shielded and the home of ice scorpions. It was a stage. He had all his emotions and reflexes on pulleys, like cardboard scenery that he could lift up or lower down as it was needed. Lucius would be jealous, did he only know how easy it was.

“Incarcerous.”

And his limbs were splayed out and held by ropes. Snape fell in an awkward position, and heard his wand tumble from his robe pocket. He also heard Regulus’s indrawn breath. He felt a touch of exasperation. Can he keep nothing to himself? I can play my part perfectly, and he will still draw the Dark Lord down on him through his own clumsiness.

“Crucio.”

Voldemort usually began with milder pain curses and worked his way up. But then, disgraced Death Eaters usually came in cringing and gabbling excuses, or simply ran and had to be hunted down. Snape had strode in half an hour late as if he had every right to be there.

He had done it to test the Dark Lord, and he had done it to test himself. If he could not stand even one Crucio from the Dark Lord’s wand, then he could not stand his spying, which ran the constant risk of it. Having encountered the reality, he would comprehend the risk better. And he was eager to see what his own response would be to the torture. He regarded it as he would have a Potions experiment, to see what would happen when extreme pain was added to the base of one Severus Snape.

He screamed. Of course he screamed. The pain running up and down his sides was like ten thousand hot forks jabbing him, like acid that started in his chest and ate outwards, and his limbs were flopping like the limbs of an art burnt to death by aiming sunlight through glass.

It hurt. The Crucio was a spell that Voldemort had perfected during his Dark Arts studies in other countries; he added a twist to it that enabled him to keep it up indefinitely, while most Dark wizards soon became exhausted by the effort to pour magical strength into the spell. Well, and they became distracted and disheartened by the screams, Snape thought. Most wizards still had a reaction to the sight of a fellow human being in such pain.

The Dark Lord did not have that problem.

He screamed, and he felt the first stab of true agony as some internal organ ruptured under the strain. He gasped as a rib broke and pierced his lung. He knew his lungs were filling with blood, and he rode the edge of death.

It filled him with exultation, cold as the breath of a winter night. If he died, he did it on his own terms. He was not like the cowards who ran away or came back crying and hoping to be forgiven. Fear did not rule him. His mind was his own, and his mind was free.

He was unsure how long it lasted. He only knew that it was done, sudden as falling off a mountainside, and he heard the measured tread of his Lord's steps coming towards him. The hem of the robe brushed over his face. Snape pursed his lips and managed a competent kiss to it.

Voldemort paused. Then Snape knew he was bending down, his face coming so close to Snape's that he smelled the scent of stone and old, dead flesh.

"You kissed my robe, Severusss." Voldemort's voice grew into a hiss when he was surprised, which did not happen often.

"You are my master," Snape whispered. It was difficult to talk. He heard the wheezy breath that indicated blood was bubbling in his lungs and his air was running out. Well, blood was bubbling in his lungs and his air was running out. His voice, if not his words, could reflect reality. "I would not—cry for mercy. You are my master."

Voldemort was silent for long moments. "And if I tortured you again?" he asked. "If I brought you to the brink of death and then asked you to acknowledge me, Severus?"

"I would do so," Snape said. He forced himself not to remember that he could be on the brink of death already, for all he knew. "I took your Mark of my own free will. I am yours."

He heard the swish of robes as Voldemort moved away, and the Finite Incantatem that ended the binding on his limbs and restored his eyesight. He lay staring at the ceiling, while Voldemort instructed Lucius and Bellatrix to feed him healing potions and insure that he survived.

They picked him up and moved him, none too gently. Snape coughed blood, and cried aloud when one of his ruptured organs brushed another one. Bellatrix's distrustful eyes glared down at him, so dark that he could see them even past the black spots dancing in front of his vision.

"You are lucky," she whispered, with the sound of jealousy clear in her voice. "You do not deserve so much of the Lord's good will."

Snape closed his eyes. He knew that he might still die from the Crucio, which he estimated must have endured for at least fifteen minutes. He knew Regulus's absence might mean that Voldemort was keeping him behind to torture him. He knew that he was probably far from sane at the moment, at least in some eyes.

He did not care.

He was free.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: The Day of the Phoenix

Harry watched patiently as the sun arose. He had not slept, and it felt as if grainy weariness were clawing at his eyes. But he could wait to rest until he performed certain important tasks. And he wanted one of those tasks to be symbolic.

So he waited as the sun arose. And beside him and behind him were Snape, Draco, Laura, Delilah, and Narcissa. Hawthorn had stalked away from him when she heard of Harry's proposed bargain, and most others were still asleep. Delilah had only changed back to human a few moments ago, when the moon sank beneath the surface of the earth and the balance of power shifted from night to day, but she was here nonetheless. Harry was glad. He hoped that her support would help others angry over his terms for settling the rebellion, in particular the other werewolves.

Snape's hands were tight on his shoulders. Harry knew he hadn't given up his concerns about the monitoring board, though he might have held whatever fit he intended to hold in private. There were shoals ahead for them, too, tricky places to be negotiated.

Harry knew all of it. It didn't bother him. Now, watching the first rays of gold crawl up the sky, he was truly calm. His pacing rage had curled up and gone to sleep, like a werewolf with Wolfsbane locked into a room for the night. He was doing the only thing he could, and seeking the only path forward.

But, of course, it would help if he could make it look like the right thing as well.

So he waited as the sun arose, and when he could finally see the edge of it over the curve of Woodhouse's hills and pine forest, he began to sing.

This song was different from all the others. Harry didn't want to cause just one emotion with it, either sorrow or joy. He lifted his voice as a tribute to the fallen in the past, and he did it so that he might link those fallen to the future and salute them by giving a clearer image of

what their deaths had won. He sang what was gone, and he sang what would come. He could imagine, if he closed his eyes and thought about it, Fawkes rising in a circle above him, every turn to the left marking an acknowledgment of death and mistakes made and griefs unchanged, and every turn to the right marking an acknowledgment of life and mistakes that could be prevented and things that could yet alter.

Harry had given up the chance to punish other killers of werewolves when he agreed to this bargain; he knew that. If he was going to emphasize that Gloriana's crime was a crime because it had occurred after the new laws were passed, then he would have to say that the other crimes were not crimes because they had happened when the hunting season was legal. He had taken what he thought he might be able to have—justice for the one murder that had happened close enough to the rebellion's end to merit a trial in the eyes of the public. That was what had made Hawthorn stalk away from him. She did not like to be told that she could not seek vengeance against the Aurors who had hurt her because to do so would unleash a string of attacks, illegal duels, and blood feuds.

Harry hoped she would forgive him. He hoped they would all forgive him. He poured all that into his song, and waited until it filled Woodhouse like an overflowing bowl of music. Then he let his magic go, too, and poured that into his voice.

Phoenixes had been associated with the sun for as long as they existed. Some legends said they had borne their ashes to the sun itself when they came back from the dead. That was not true, and Harry knew it, but some of the other legends about phoenixes had proven to be true of him, who only had the voice and the fire and not the body. So he imagined his voice growing louder and louder, and mingling with the sun's rays as they spread all over Britain.

He sang, and he wanted everyone magical to hear him doing so.

His vision flattened as he sang, and then it rose and spread. He might have been on dragonback, looking down on the British Isles from a grand height. They appeared as painted images below him, with gaping holes full of light and movement that let glimpses of moving

figures through. He saw Augureys in Ireland pause and lift their heads, beaks gaping, at the sound of the song. He saw a unicorn begin a pass through a Muggle town, breaking the boundaries between magic and mundane and spilling the melody into their lives. Harry had never known the look of almost painful wonder that the Muggle men and women wore for the moment he saw them. He decided that must be what it was like to live in a world without magic and then suddenly glimpse it.

He saw people flooding in to work at the Ministry stop moving, and close their eyes. He saw McGonagall open the front doors of Hogwarts, and come out into the aftermath of a thunderstorm, tilting her head to the sky. Connor was trying to make gestures to tell everyone else that this was his brother, since he didn't want to actually speak and interrupt the song, and Luna was smiling.

Pharos Starrise clasped his hands behind his back, leaned against the wall of his ancestral home, and fought the longing to relax and weep. Harry had been instrumental in the death of his uncle, and still sheltered his mother's murderer, and he would not forget that.

A man grooming a Granian in the west of Scotland paused and squinted at the sun. He had heard that the boy vates had a phoenix's voice, too, but that didn't matter to his cause. He had no idea why the chords and warbles he was hearing now should matter, but he knew that they did, somehow.

Lucius Malfoy was very pale, and his face only grew paler as he listened.

Harry's voice hovered and lingered over the Isle of Man, and Calibrid Opalline braced her hands on the table in front of her and bowed her head, relaxing from the burden of caring for her family for one moment. Paton stroked the head of his youngest grandchild and listened with distant eyes. A few of the burned children Harry had woken from their fear-induced trances after Acies had come laughed and stretched out their hands in recognition of the voice that had freed them.

The Hebridean Black dragons in the sanctuary on their islands came awake all at once, bellowing and shouting, even the ones in the thick of the sleep that followed when they'd eaten well. Their handlers, of the MacFusty clan, ran about trying to calm them. Dark head after dark head turned in the direction of the phoenix song, and fire flared and danced across the stone and across the sea.

Harry reached after a pitch of determination and stubbornness that carried him, and all those listening to him, to a pinnacle of change, where they could shine in the sun. He held them there, lingering, on a single, stretched note.

And then he let his voice dissipate, fading into the sunlight and the air and the slowly thinning colors of dawn, and freed them.

Opening his eyes, he nodded to the people gathered around him. "Let's make the plans that we need to make," he said quietly. "The first thing I need to do is contact Scrimgeour about the time we'll be arriving."

Hawthorn had changed back while she was in the middle of clawing her bedding apart. She collapsed on the floor, her hand clenched on the sheet, and breathed, hearing the thud of her heart and the rasp of her lungs as if they belonged to someone else.

Her packmate was dead. The hole she had felt when Fergus died was there again, but deeper and more pervasive this time, as if one of her limbs had vanished when Claudia did. Hawthorn had known her longer. She had taken comfort with Claudia when Pansy died. Several mornings she had awakened to Claudia wrapped around her, her breathing soft and steady in her ears. And if she rarely spoke words of sympathy, she had her eyes to talk for her. Hawthorn sometimes found herself wishing she had known Claudia before the attack, but it would have been unlikely they would ever meet; Claudia was the daughter of a Light family, and engaged in doing private research on the nature of Light and Dark, and inventing or modifying new spells. However she came to know her, Hawthorn was grateful.

And now she was gone, and the only thing Harry could think of or talk of was a trial to make sure that Gloriana, her murderer, went behind bars in Tullianum.

It was not enough. She could suffer the same treatment that Hawthorn had when she was captive in Tullianum, and it would never be enough. How could it be enough when that woman had made part of Hawthorn's self vanish?

Even Delilah did not quite understand, perhaps because her powerful family had protected her and she had not gone to Tullianum with Hawthorn. Apparently, Aurors had approached the Gloryflower property, but Laura had changed in front of them and roared at them, and they had rapidly found excuses to be elsewhere. She did not understand that Hawthorn had looked on their little pack as one of the few worthwhile things to come out of the last few years, and now that Claudia was gone, the loss diminished everything that had come before. She felt the same loss, but she looked at it through a different lens.

Hawthorn knew she could mourn Claudia's death by more useless gestures—ripping the bedsheets apart as she had done while still a wolf grieving for the death of her packmate, or trying to get vengeance on Gloriana Griffinsnest, when that would only see her exiled from the Alliance and perhaps dead. Or she could curl up and lower her head like a good little dog and tell Harry that she understood, that why should she ask for vengeance when she could have justice?

Or she could do what it was actually in her to do.

Take this rage. Hide it deep. Grow the hatred the way she would grow a flower that she wanted no one else stealing the seeds of: place it in a corner of her garden and tend it alone, hidden from all eyes.

The hatred, and the determination that came with it, would give her a cure for her lycanthropy in the end, Hawthorn thought, and perhaps even one that did not stand such a high chance of killing her. And they would give her the patience to wait and watch, and take her

revenge in so hidden a way that not even Harry could argue against it, nor would have any idea that she had done it.

Hawthorn had killed only one fellow Death Eater for something she had done, which was try to get the Dark Lord interested in using Hawthorn's husband. She had done it by waiting, and watching, and then, in the end, arranging matters so that it was Lucius who actually killed the woman, thinking it all his own idea. She could do the same thing now. The sword would cut down her enemy, but no one would be aware whose hand had held the hilt.

She rose and pushed her hair back into shape, then grasped her wand and changed her tattered clothes for new. She conjured water that she poured into a basin on the end of her table and slowly bathed her face, while peering into a similarly conjured mirror to make sure that she looked normal.

She was a pureblood witch, not a mindless beast. She was always going to remember that, no matter how many times the world exasperated her and tried to make her forget it.

When the knock came on the door, she could open it and smile at Harry's anxious face. He tried to explain, to apologize—as if anything could apologize for Gloriana Griffinsnest not dying in pain—but Hawthorn got there first, pitching her voice calm and sweet and low.

"It was something I should have realized on my own, Harry, given the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow." She smiled at him, and he studied her face carefully back, looking for guile. Hawthorn would give him none. He had been a good leader. He had even understood why she used blood curses on Indigena Yaxley in the midst of battle. It was not his fault that he did not understand this, that their stances on vengeance must part forever. And, in fact, in the best scenario, he would never have to know. Hawthorn would simply complete her vengeance with no one the wiser and leave Harry happy and content with her. "I am calm now. And I agree that this compromise is the best one we can look forward to."

"Do you want to go with us when we leave Woodhouse?" Harry asked. "The Minister has asked us to meet him in front of the Ministry at

noon. The time of brightest Light, you know.” He gave a faint smile as if he were embarrassed about the symbolism of that, at least. He should be, Hawthorn thought. “Only a small delegation is going, of course. New laws or no new laws, most of the pack leaders are still bitter or fearful, and many of them had their homes destroyed in the attacks, so they have nowhere to go but Woodhouse right now.”

I know, Hawthorn wanted to say. I was at one of those attacks. And your efforts to ease their pain, while commendable, are simply too late and not enough, Harry.

What she said was, “Yes, I should like to go. Is the Minister going to show Gloriana Griffinsnest in front of the wizarding world, and explain her arrest?”

Harry nodded.

“I should like to go,” Hawthorn repeated softly, scratching her left shoulder.

Indigena leaned against the wall of the burrow, pressing her ear to the earth and listening in rapturous silence until the last of Harry’s song died away. Then she sighed, and the tendrils of the swift-roses and other plants gathered around her writhed in agreement. The song had been like sunlight, and they were sorry to see it go.

She checked on her Lord, but he still lay in the coma he had worn since that strange attack of convulsions, his hands clasped tightly around the golden cup, his breath rasping in and out of his lungs. No more strange cuts had appeared on his body. Indigena was grateful for that. She’d examined the cuts, and the only things she thought they resembled were the talon marks of a raptor, a hawk or an eagle. She did not know how to prevent them from appearing, nor what spell might have been used to cause them.

She did add finding out to her other load of research. She had enough to read about, Merlin knew, but she could not simply ignore a spell or piece of magic that was likely to prove dangerous to her Lord.

Indigena dragged Odi et Amo towards her again, and blew dust and dirt off the cover. Her grandmother would be furious to see Indigena treating a valuable book this way. She had been the one to teach Indigena about gardening and the love of green and growing things, but she had always insisted on both of them washing their hands before they came into the library. “Weeding isn’t reading,” she’d said, and Indigena still believed that.

As it was, she had little choice.

Currently, she was rereading Chapter Eleven, in hopes that it would provide some clues as to why her Lord’s latest plan wasn’t going well. Indigena was trying, but she wasn’t as strong as he was, and with only the one candidate to practice on—well, two if one stretched it, but it was the difference between a healthy plant in a pot and a few seeds that had gone through fire and flood and might or might not sprout—she dared not step too clumsily and lose control altogether. Harry glanced over the group of people going with him. Draco, of course. Snape would not be left behind. Narcissa was coming with them, and Harry was glad of that. He had the feeling she was genuinely calm, not merely pretending to be calm the way that Hawthorn was. She would add to their group by her presence, her composure, and her quiet refusal to let anything undignified happen while she was around.

Harry was less sure about taking Delilah and Hawthorn, but both deserved to be present when Claudia’s murderer was delivered to justice. Besides, he thought that Delilah would be all right with Laura to restrain her. And the Gloryflowers were necessary to counter the perception that every single one of Harry’s allies, even the ones he brought along in such an important moment as this, was Dark.

Adalrico was coming, and Millicent; Elfrida would stay with Marian in Woodhouse. Harry, after careful consideration, had chosen Camellia and Trumpetflower as representatives from his own pack. Remus had almost sat up and begged when Harry announced the need for candidates, and had sunk back into his chair with a stricken expression on his face when Harry refused him. But he had also given Harry a sharp glance that said he might be arriving at the

beginnings of comprehension. Harry was glad for him, if that was so. He missed Remus sometimes.

Peregrine would come to witness and speak for the packs driven out of their homes in London by the hunting, though Harry had persuaded her two guardian wolves to stay behind. There was simply too great a chance that they would bite if someone even looked to be threatening Peregrine, and on a day of the full moon, that was inexcusable. Helcas would come for the goblins, and Bone for the centaurs. Harry did wish there was a way to take the karkadann, but he couldn't imagine Apparating her.

He himself took Helcas's arm, while Draco took his mother's, and looked around as the others matched up into people who could Apparate and those who couldn't, holding tight to their partners. "Everyone knows the general area in front of the Ministry that we want to aim for?" he asked. "The alley that holds the telephone box?"

Nods came back at him from around the circle, and Harry smiled. "Good. Let's do this."

He closed his eyes and shut all the confused, crowding thoughts out of his mind with Occlumency. He breathed, deeply and easily, and made himself think of the gains he was going to win by going ahead with this plan. Some of them were things he should have done long since, like including more Light wizards in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. Aurora had made the point in her letter to him that there should be more Sun among the Shadows. Though Harry disagreed politely with her about that interpretation of the Alliance's name, it was a useful impression for this meeting, along with the Minister's suggestion to meet at noon.

He put away the considerations of whether what he had done was right. He was surrounded by his own doubts and doubters. Other people would talk to him and take him to task if he became too complacent. He did not think that he ever need feel uneasy about resting on his laurels, because he wouldn't get a chance to rest, and to some people, these wouldn't be laurels.

They Apparated, and landed with stone beneath their feet. Harry heard Helcas give a deep sniff beside him, and opened his eyes to see a look of bliss on the goblin's face.

"What is it?" he asked in curiosity.

"This city smells of stone and metal." Helcas looked approvingly towards the visible parts of Muggle London, smothered half in sunlight and half in fog. "I have long wondered how many of my southern kin lived here, where they could not hear the sound of the sea nor feel the wetness soaking their shoulders. Now I see that London may have its compensations."

Harry nodded, and glanced about to see that everyone had arrived safely, though Bone was checking his hooves and tail-tip to make sure nothing had been Splinched. Then he turned and looked down at the alley, at the welcoming committee the Minister had set up for them.

It was more elaborate than Harry would have guessed, or perhaps people were simply more eager to see the end of the rebellion than he had assumed. Around the telephone box blazed a ring of light, a leaping fountain of it that rose and then cascaded back down, never quite touching the stones. Harry recognized it as a variation of the spell that could create a private dueling circle for two combatants. At the head of the ring, under a banner floating in the air that said WELCOME BACK VATES, stood the Minister, with several members of the Wizengamot behind him. Harry was happy to see Griselda Marchbanks and some southern goblins among them. Outside the ring of light gathered others, trying to press forward. The light rejected them, though, bending inward a small distance and then firming again to push them back.

The moment Harry met Scrimgeour's eyes, the ring of light expanded to include him and his companions. Harry paused a moment to let everyone arrange themselves as they'd agreed on—Draco at his right shoulder, Snape at his left, and the others spreading out in a tail like a comet's behind that. Harry frowned as he heard hooves clapping, and hoped the others remembered his directive that Bone and Helcas should not be left to the last row.

Then they advanced.

Scrimgeour stood with his head up, watching them come. Harry hadn't seen him in a month, and was struck by how much he had changed. His eyes had shadows behind them, as if he had crossed battlefields. His stance no longer carried the unconscious pride it had before, of a man who knew his place in the world and what to do with it. Now he looked like someone who'd tap-danced on a peat bog and learned to keep his steps even in spite of that. He stood with his whole body balanced around the scroll he held—the scroll with the final, promised terms of the rebellion settlement, Harry guessed. His hair had paled further. If it had any color now but white, Harry couldn't see it.

He had to honor Scrimgeour. The man had made some dangerous, difficult, and ethically prickly decisions of his own, of which the Ritual of Cincinnatus was only the most prominent one. And there were more difficulties with meeting with Harry like this, giving him the amount of respect that he might to a visiting Minister of Magic. Some people would sneer at Scrimgeour, and see him as bowing down to the intimidation of a sixteen-year-old boy. Aurora was confident they could save Scrimgeour's position in office along with the Alliance, the rights of werewolves, and the political power of the Light. Harry was not so sure.

He halted about twenty feet away from the Minister, far enough that he could see curses coming in time to deflect them, and bowed. The crowd outside the circle of light yelled, but their voices were dimmed to murmurs by the ring. Harry wondered if they were shouting mostly scorn or encouragement, and which it would be better to hope for.

"Minister," he said. "Thank you for inviting us here. You have the agreement that we came to sign?"

"I do," said Scrimgeour, and tossed the scroll into the air. Harry's surprise lasted only until he saw the strands of light reaching out from the sides of the ring, catching the parchment and unrolling it from its golden ribbon. It opened quickly, and then a melodious, uninflected voice spoke from it, reciting the terms aloud. Despite its beauty, and

the necessity of having all of this read aloud so that the audience would know what it said, Harry shivered. The voice without a trace of emotion or tone reminded him just a little too much of the Unspeakables' voices the first time he had heard them.

"Minister Rufus Scrimgeour, temporarily dictator of the British Ministry of Magic due to the Ritual of Cinnatus, and Harry vates, leader of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, have come to an agreement. The Ministry promises to offer werewolves the same rights as witches and wizards. This set of terms was offered to Harry vates on October 24th, 1996, and accepted by him later the next day. Thus, the murder of Claudia Griffinsnest by Gloriana Griffinsnest that night was unjust and illegal, and will be recorded as such by the Wizengamot."

A large puff of colored smoke rose off to one side; Harry suspected it was more to draw attention than anything else, since there was no reason the Aurors holding Gloriana couldn't simply have Apparated into the ring of light. He turned to see them, and tried to restrain a snarl of vicious satisfaction. Gloriana was shackled, and held in such a position that it was impossible for her to walk with her head held haughtily high and pretend to no discomposure. In fact, she lost her calm the moment her eyes fell on Harry.

"You did this!" she almost screamed at him, straining at the chains to reach him. Harry saw the fetters were silver, and had to duck his head to hide a smile. "You were the one who made sure I was arrested!"

"By my acceptance of the Minister's terms of an alliance, yes, I did," said Harry quietly. He was aware that the voice had stopped reading the scroll, but he didn't much care. If the audience wanted to hear the exchange between him and Gloriana, they would hear it. "You committed a murder. Of your blood relative." He could let contempt and disgust drip from his voice now, and if everyone not in his alliance thought that came mostly from the fact that Gloriana and Claudia had been related, and not because he hated the idea of the murder in the first place, they were free to think that. "I merely requested the Ministry to follow through on its promise."

Gloriana strained against her chains again. "And what about the other hunters and attackers during the hunting season?" she shrieked. "Are you going to accuse them, too?"

Looking into her distended features, Harry could see how intently she must have thought she was going to get away with this. It was the only explanation for such deluded behavior now. That added to his sense of satisfaction about sending her to trial. "No," he said, though that drove a dagger into a different part of himself. "What they did was legal by the laws of the time. We cannot arrest them for that, though I stand by my conviction that what they did was unethical if not illegal. But the laws did apply when you murdered Claudia, ma'am. I hope that you enjoy your trial."

His fury was awake and pacing in his chest again. He was strong enough to rip Gloriana apart, if he wanted.

He held himself back. He watched in silence as the Aurors escorted Gloriana to the telephone box, and led her down. Then he turned to Scrimgeour. The Minister was watching him intently, but he relaxed when Harry looked at him, and waved at the scroll. The toneless voice began to speak again.

"The terms are the same as those sent to the Daily Prophet. Werewolves will no longer be hunted. They will be tried fairly. They may hold paying jobs, wands, and custody of their children and property legally theirs. They need not wear collars, nor carry identification papers, and any imprisonment in Tullianum on charges of being a werewolf alone is strictly forbidden, as is experimentation by the Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries. The Ministry regrets that such atrocities were necessary to make it see its duty towards its werewolf citizens."

Harry could hear Peregrine and Camellia muttering together behind his back, but he didn't turn to face them. They were probably saying that the atrocities were regretted even more by those werewolf citizens who had had to live through them. And, well, that was true, but Harry could not reach back and change the past. He had to keep his eyes on the future.

“In addition, those funds that once went towards the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts will be directed towards brewing Wolfsbane for all registered werewolves and making sure that a cure for lycanthropy is researched,” the voice continued implacably. “The Ministry also agrees to set up a Goblin Board to address communication with the northern goblins, and to have southern goblins among its representatives. Other Ministry employees will venture into the Forbidden Forest to treat with the centaurs, and discuss registration for Being status and interaction with humans.”

Scrimgeour paused the voice from the scroll and turned to Harry. Harry inclined his head. “I accept that,” he said.

The Minister nodded, and the voice began once more.

“In return, Harry vates agrees to lay down his rebellion. He will return to the wizarding world and acknowledge the legal authority of the Ministry of Magic once more. He also agrees to accept more Light wizards into his Alliance of Sun and Shadow, as long as they will swear the oaths involved, and he accepts a monitoring board to watch over him and guide his behavior. Two prominent members of this monitoring board, Aurora Whitestag and Griselda Marchbanks, will help him to choose the other members.”

Movement stirred behind Scrimgeour’s shoulders, and the two women broke apart from the rest and came out to stand on either side of the Minister. Aurora Whitestag looked as if someone had set the world on fire for her. Madam Marchbanks’s expression was more guarded. Harry could not blame her. He nodded to both of them as to two equal comrades and turned back to the scroll.

“The Ministry recognizes that the monitoring board does not claim to have official guardianship of Harry vates, but they can and will advise in him matters to do with his vates task and his destruction of the Dark Lord You-Know-Who, with the details to be hammered out in private conference. Members may include Light and Dark wizards, and wizards of any blood status, as well as magical creatures. The only requirement is that they meet the approval of all three people

selecting the members, and that they swear the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow.

“Finally, all charges against Harry vates, including trespass on and damage to Ministry property, and harboring fugitives, are dropped.

“Witnessed this day, October 26th, 1996, by supporters of both Minister Rufus Scrimgeour and Harry vates, and the wider wizarding community. Signed—“

The scroll’s voice broke off abruptly. Scrimgeour held out his hand, and the parchment came skimming over to him. He produced a quill and ceremoniously signed his name at the foot of the page, then held it out to Harry.

Harry could feel the tension of the people behind him as he took the scroll, but he couldn’t see any magical bindings or compulsion spells on the parchment, other than the expected one: after he signed it, he would be expected to abide by the terms. And he could do that. He let it float in the air as he accepted the quill from Scrimgeour and signed his name. After Harry, he hesitated only an instant before using vates, wrinkling his nose as he did so. Doing this felt too much like claiming it as a title, but he had no last name—and probably never would, if he had anything to say about it—and it was how the scroll had referred to him.

“Signed by Minister Rufus Scrimgeour and Harry vates,” the voice said, though now Harry thought it had a hint of triumph in it, and then the parchment rolled itself back up and the golden ribbon tied it. Rufus drew out his wand and tapped the scroll, and a second copy came into being. He held it out solemnly to Harry.

Harry was just opening his mouth to say something significantly splendid when he heard the warble of phoenix song from above his left wrist. He blushed as Scrimgeour smiled, and then took the scroll and murmured quickly, “I’m sorry, but I don’t think that I can speak—“

“Harry.” It was Paton Opalline, his voice tight and urgent in a way that Harry had never heard it before. “The dragon is gone.”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“Acies,” said Paton. “The British Red-Gold. Calibrid just went to look in on her, and she’s gone. We didn’t feel her fly away or break any of the spells keeping her asleep. We don’t know when she left, or where she is.”

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. He had a very good guess as to what might have awakened Acies, come to think of it. He remembered the Hebridean Black dragons holding up their heads and bellowing when his phoenix song spread across the Isles. Dragons were called the Singers, and Acies had changed in the wake of siren song and the frenzied music of Light and Dark on Midsummer Day. And it might follow, it might, that she would follow the lure of the phoenix song to him.

Harry had to go to a battlefield where he could fight her.

“Thank you, Mr. Opalline,” he said now. “I will—“

And then he heard the sound of tearing sailcloth, and knew it for the sound of immense wings. He swung around amid screams, and lifted his eyes to the sky.

Coils of red-gold filled the western horizon as the dragon came storming straight towards him. Her jaws were already open, as if to breathe fire, and Harry imagined the destruction such flames could wreak in Muggle London—what it would mean for unshielded Muggles, or unshielded wizards, to face a dragon—and he remembered the Death Eaters melting. Acies was already swinging her head from side to side, as if she couldn’t see him and was thinking about another target.

Harry stepped forward, and began to sing.

Chapter Forty: Wings Vaster Than The Earth

Harry wasn't entirely sure what he was doing as he sent his voice spiraling upward, other than trying to draw Acies's attention—or the attention of the dragon that had once been Acies. He must remember to make that distinction, he thought. She had said once that she wanted him to remember her when there was nothing human left in her, and this was the case now. She did not remember him. Essentially, Acies had died on that tower above the Hogwarts battlefield on Midsummer Day.

But his song had awakened her, and dragons were called the Singers. He sent his voice arching upward, reaching, hoping.

She barreled down towards him, and what came out of her mouth in answer was not song but flame.

Harry had been thinking it might be. He'd had his magic hovering around him, and now he raised it and whipped it forward, intoning *Protego* in his head and imagining a protective shield surrounding all those people gathered in the alley. It helped that it was a physically confined space, and that he didn't have to try to shield many people spread out over a wide area.

The fire, that piercing beam of concentrated white light, hit the shield and splattered against it. Harry could feel the dragon's devouring magic working against his own, a mindless beast, striving to eat the shield, and then fall through it and eat the people beyond. Harry breathed sharply, letting the breaths come between breaks in his singing, which he still hoped might calm her, and sent his strength reeling into the shield in slaps at the same time. Already, the effort was pulling at his magical core. Either he was more exhausted than he'd thought or the dragon's magic was more powerful than he'd thought. He believed it was the latter.

And he knew he didn't have long before the fire either ate through or some idiot drew his wand and cast a curse in his panic—which would weaken the shield, coming from behind as it did. The only blessing right now was that the dragon was close enough that her flame was a narrow lance, which only spread out as it neared the target; otherwise,

it would have consumed the buildings all along the alley in flame. And as it trembled around the Shield Charm, sliding further and further in sheets of white sun-heat, Harry knew it wouldn't be long before that happened.

He could think of only one thing he could do, and it would be tricky.

But then, Harry thought as he sang, if there was one thing someone might name him by this point in his life, it was an expert in tricky situations.

He threw most of his strength into the shield, recklessly draining his magical core, long enough to insure that those behind it would be safe for at least another few moments. Then he looked up at the dragon, gave himself only a moment to judge distance and speed and height—he'd played Quidditch, he knew how to do this, and the dragon was close—and Apparated himself onto her back.

He landed on simmering scale with a thump that made blisters rise on his palm and his legs ache and burn, and the dragon reared back, her fire spraying into the air, and screamed.

Falco circled in the air, staring. He had attended the ceremony that marked the end of the rebellion in his sea eagle form, watching with angry eyes as Harry accepted the Minister's terms and then signed the scroll. Others didn't know or care about the changes they were inflicting on the wizarding world, but at least they had either fought against it or mindlessly followed their leaders into what they thought was a better day. They had not, as Harry had, possessed immense magic that could change the balance of the world and then not paid attention to what they were doing.

And then the dragon appeared. Falco himself was still debating what he should do—he had never faced a British Red-Gold before, and they had been dead long before his time—when Harry Apparated himself out from under the shield.

The dragon reacted at once to the presence and the weight on her back, slight though it was, confirming all the rumors Falco had ever heard about the sensitivity of scales along that region of the neck.

She swung her head up and turned and tried to bite the new threat, her flame dying out from between her teeth so that she didn't singe one of the few parts on her body vulnerable to fire. But Harry had chosen a good position, just behind the neck, and she couldn't reach him with her teeth.

She began hovering in midair, with awkward beats of her wings, one clawed talon rising to pluck him off.

Falco stared, and felt something like a shard of envy pierce his heart when he saw what Harry did next. To be that young again, and that reckless.

Harry felt as if he knelt on sand in the middle of summer noontime. The scales shimmered beneath his hand, the color of blood in sunlight, incredibly beautiful, but Merlin, they hurt, blisters were already forming and bursting all along his palm, and he could feel his clothes beginning to smolder.

There was one thing that might shield him. He concentrated on the idea of what would happen if Acies should roast all these people beneath him simply because she'd been drawn by his song, how monstrously unjust that was, and how he would have more deaths on his conscience, because of that, because it was always his fault when something like that happened.

With a roar, his own phoenix fire rose and spread out through his skin. Harry blinked at the world through a sheening of blue flame, and felt the burning in his legs and hand stop. Then he opened his mouth, took a deep breath that smelled of smoke and brimstone, and began to sing again.

He hoped the Shield Charm had held long enough, though in his heart of hearts he thought he would know if Snape and Draco had died. He hoped the white fire sliding down it had not reached the roofs of buildings on either side of the alley, which they would turn into torches. He hoped many things, but he kicked them all out of his mind, sinking them into the Occlumency pools, and concentrated on the song.

This time, Harry was remembering those images that Fawkes had given him as he danced among the clouds on Midwinter night nearly a year ago, the moonlight and starlight and sunlight and all the legends that came with them. He had given Harry the gift of his voice, and the gift of his fire, and, once, the gift of his tears, which Harry had spent on Evan Rosier. But he had given him something more than that. He had died as a sacrifice.

And what came through him was Light.

Harry sang the song of morning, and he reached out and touched the wild vibrations of the dragon's mind, which was tuned to the song of the Dark. Dragons were the prime Dark creatures in at least one sense. They were all wildness, all will. They did as they liked and cared for nothing that held them back. Harry had seen that when he peered into the minds of the three dragons at the Triwizard Tournament. And they had all been lesser dragons, smaller cousins of the British Red-Gold breed.

She was Wildness.

Harry felt his song meet a greater one, brooding in the dragon's mind for centuries with no one else to unleash it. It sang in every beat of her wings, in every turn of her talons, in every blast of her fire. It did not want to listen to him, and it did not want to turn back; in fact, the very fact that there was a Light singer abroad in the world this morning had infuriated it, and had given it the strength to break free of the sleeping spells that Calibrid cast on it. It had come to find him because it could not bear to see Harry exist, singing his little songs of tameness and enslavement.

Those words of hatred were the Dark song's lyrics, and they appeared in Harry's head as if branded there. For a moment, the heat of the dragon's scales crept back into his consciousness, and he knew that he would burn if he thought too much about it.

He shook his head and threw himself into the song again, forcing his way forward through shields of blue, telling the Dark song in wordless warbles that it had made a mistake.

The song uttered a sneering screech and insisted that it had not.

But you did, said Harry, with a windy phrase that he thought Fawkes had intoned that night, dancing between the dark clouds. You think I am a Light wizard with the voice of a phoenix. But I am not. And he thought at his hand Manus flagrans!

The jolt of alien heat that he sent up through Acies with the Burning Touch Curse did not hurt her, but it was a Dark spell, and one that most Light wizards would not use. Harry felt the astonished silence of a starry gulf spread around him. The Dark song, reeling, did not know what to think.

Harry tried to convey that as best he could. The phoenix's voice was not the best place for a discovery of the Darkness within oneself.

But there might be a place, the place where Dark wildness and Light respect for free will met. They were not so different in those aspects, Light and Dark. But the Light cared more about restraining itself for the sake of others, while the Dark would take other wills captive so that they wouldn't interfere with its own—and thus they produced the aspects of Light tameness and Dark compulsion.

Harry was more Light in that aspect, and he could not deny it, but he had known rage. That night when Bellatrix had cut his hand off, he had come near to joining the wild Dark that roared between the stars, simply because his emotions and his magic had both spiraled out of control. The Dark song in the dragon's mind caught a snatch of that and bayed like an eager hound, demanding to know more of it.

Harry took a deep breath, to fuel the music that he would need to tell this, and then plunged straight into song and out through the other side.

Falco could not believe that Harry had not killed the dragon yet. He must know that even a British Red-Gold likely would not survive a jolt of magic to the heart. And he was closer to her heart now than he would have been on the ground. And if he did not know dragon anatomy well enough for that trick, then he could have drunk her power and made her unable to fly or breathe fire, both of which dragons relied on their innate magic for.

Instead, it was as if he were communing with her, talking with her the way that he would have an intelligent being, and trying to argue her out of attacking those common wizards who waited below, their necks craned up, staring at the wheeling dragon and the blue-glowing boy on her back.

Falco darted a quick glance at them, the ordinary ones. They were well; the flame had gone away before it could dent the Shield Charm, though a moment more and someone might have been wounded. But they weren't getting under shelter. Falco uttered a screech of disgust. Had the very sight frozen them? Sometimes he despaired of the ability of people to protect themselves. This was yet another reason that he hadn't Declared. A Dark Lord or Light Lord was expected to shelter those who followed him, and Falco would rather they learned to protect themselves.

His gaze went back to Harry as the song changed. Falco frowned slightly. He had spent a year among phoenixes once, back when his magic was still mostly Light, back when he had hoped that his Animagus form would be a phoenix. And he knew that their voices didn't sound like that.

Determined to discover what dangerous mistake Harry was planning on making this time, he canted his wings and swept upward, trailing behind the dragon so that she wouldn't decide to roast him and scoop him up for a meal with her talons. Wizards had died in stupider ways, facing a British Red-Gold.

Harry, with a grimace, gripped some of the careful not-thinking he had grown to prevent these memories from ambushing him and ripped. They came flooding back into his mind as if they had happened yesterday, and the Dark song did not see them, but heard them through his voice.

Harry sang the despair he had felt as he writhed with helplessness and watched the boy Greyback and Whitecheek had killed die in front of him. They had died in the end, and one could argue that they had paid for their crime with their lives, but that hardly mattered to the

exposed, raw memory. Harry should have been able to protect him—he was still the strongest wizard there, before Voldemort's resurrection ritual—and he had not.

And I did not Kieran, and I did not Claudia. I make empty promises and I do not keep them. Helplessness was a wine he had forgotten how much he hated, a cold poison sliding down his throat. If I could use a Time-Turner to go back in time and prevent Gloriana from killing Claudia, Loki from killing Kieran, and Whitecheek and Greyback from killing him, then I would.

The Dark song howled eagerly, and demanded more.

Harry gave it the pain and the suffering of having his wrist cut off, the impressions he'd fallen through, down into some neverending ocean of black and red. He had thought, at the time, that he would never stop falling. Sharp teeth bit his left wrist, and fire clawed at it, and he forced his eyes open to see that it was bleeding, the blood sizzling into steam on contact with the dragon's scales.

More, hissed the Dark song.

Harry gave it the rage he had felt when fighting Voldemort. And the Dark song sighed and crooned and hissed at him.

Harry was glad his eyes were open. He saw the moment when the dragon, freed as if from the necessity of communing with him, turned her head back down and eyed the streets of gaping, screaming Muggles beneath her. Secure in the knowledge that she bore a Dark singer and not a Light on her back, she could get on with the hunger clamoring in her belly.

Harry tilted his head back, and sang joy, and sang Light, and snagged the dragon's attention into furious roaring again.

He cannot alter like that. He cannot move between Dark and Light like that.

It wasn't possible, as Falco well knew. He had once studied the arts that he thought would permit him to move between the allegiances that easily, and song was one of them. Why should it not be? It meant different things to each listener, and yet it was lauded as a universal language. And he had come to the conclusion, sadly, that the Dark and Light knew all about song, and the other ways of escaping their attention and not Declaring, and he could not fool them that way.

So he had learned to think the thoughts that must be thought, courting first one and then the other until he knew the paths and the secrets of both well enough that he could flit seamlessly into and out of them, tempting both with the knowledge that his Declaration might be right around the corner.

And now Harry was moving between them in such a crude way, throwing himself from rage to joy.

Falco shook his head from side to side, an unnatural gesture for a sea eagle, but perfect for the negation he wanted to express, and heard expressed, as well, in the dragon's roar. The Dark is not so easily fooled. She knows what he is now, and she will pull him off in a moment. The dragon had already pulled up to hover again.

Harry poured all the intensity and all the joy of the moment of Draco's arrival at Woodhouse into his voice. This was what he was, damn it. The Dark song did not get to say that he was only Dark, only wild and war-like. He might be more wild than he was at peace, but those moments of happiness were part of his life, too.

The Dark song rolled back to him and stabbed him with chords made of his own memories, showing him all the despair and guilt and hatred that he had admitted to, and asked him whether most of his life had not been suffering. Even this settling of the rebellion had come from the desire to take vengeance, hadn't it? He hadn't settled the grief about Kieran in his soul, and that had driven him to take extreme measures when it came to claiming justice for Claudia. He was not grieving; he was raging, and trying to destroy her murderer, and those were things that someone Dark, someone obsessed with revenge, would do.

Harry told it about the moment when Draco had appeared in his bedroom at Woodhouse, the flooding joy and shock and relief when he had realized what this meant, the hesitancy he had had in accepting the offer until he realized that Draco's long absence had come from the need to think this over, and how no kiss had ever tasted so good as the one they shared then. Draco had followed his own heart, his own choice, his own goal, his own will. That was what Harry wanted for everyone, that kind of courage. It was the hardest thing to do—or perhaps the second hardest, with the only thing more difficult than that being restraining one's own will and making sure one did not step on others. But that was Harry's task as vates. Draco's task in that short period of time had been to make sure he knew what he really wanted, and he did.

Harry had never loved Draco so much as he did in that moment. He would never understand why weakness of will might draw someone else to a partner. Harry loved and admired and needed strength.

The Dark song coiled and lashed about him, confused. Harry heard it hissing steadily in his ear, and then he felt the scrape of talons on his head as the dragon tried to pluck him from her back once more.

Harry sang the memory of the Walpurgis Night when Voldemort had tried to enslave the wild Dark, and he had helped it. He gave the Dark song that was Acies's mind the image of that, the freedom, the utter submission he'd done to the Dark—riding it, not trying to chain it or confine it—let her mind fall headlong into that, and then ripped the image into something else.

He was high in the air above Britain, on Midwinter night, his heart aching as he watched the Light grip and fight the wild Dark, forcing it back. Fawkes had died, an immortal creature who should have burned and come back to life again and again. That immortality laid down, freely given, had been enough to open a gate and bring the gryphon through. The Dark song recoiled, screaming.

Harry threw it into the Chamber of Secrets, himself kneeling on the floor, his mind in shreds after Sylarana's abrupt death, and the silent self swallowing the bit of Tom Riddle that he'd left in the diary, swallowing his magic, and then coming over to show pictures to Harry.

He had tried to reason that he did not hate his family, that he had no reason to hate his family, and the silent self had replied with implacable truth, implacable fury. The Dark song came back to him, purring and growing fat on the loathing Harry had felt for his parents and brother.

And then they were in the Owlery on the day that Harry had broken free of the phoenix web, and Harry sent notes like arrows to sting and scratch the Dark song, and show it how he had come free of that web in the moment at spring equinox when Light and Dark were balanced. Triumph, gentle and fierce, rose in him, and once more the dragon screamed in confusion. She knew no gentle triumph. From the moment dragons broke the egg, all life was a war, an endless battle to send their wills forth and not have them balked by others. The shell was the first enemy, and then the hatchlings that would devour their siblings in the nest if they could. She did not understand how a victory could be for the self and not involve hurt to someone else.

Harry twisted again, and showed her a victory that had done harm, when he killed for the first time. Rodolphus LeStrange's body had carried a piece of Voldemort, once imprisoned in a locket that Sirius wore and Regulus stole, and Harry had known it was necessary to kill him. But he had been thirteen, and exhausted from Sirius's death, and the revelation of him being the one to deflect Voldemort's Killing Curse and not Connor, and the freeing of the Dementors. He had just wanted it all to stop. That kind of dizzy exhaustion that lashed out because it didn't know what else to do was familiar to the Dark song, and it crept back, suspiciously, singing a low chorus at him to confirm what he was.

And then it understood, and Harry had no need of the violent alteration between memories. It grasped him, it understood him, as both Dark and Light, dragon-phoenix, human-Singer. It had never known something like him in the world before, just as the dragon knew nothing else like her. It wrapped itself around him and clung, as one comrade-in-arms to another, hissing and purring. Harry took a deep breath, feeling his throat burn, and murmured reassurances, all the while thinking of what he could possibly do with a British Red-Gold. There was no way she could come back with him to Hogwarts,

of course. She would burn down the Forbidden Forest and devour everything that lived within it in a week.

The Dark song cried to him again, the song of something swimming alone in the deep gulf between the stars. Lonely. So lonely, it said, in a series of repeating roundels. It had gone to the Isle of Man because it had sensed the presence of the skeleton that the Opallines had made into Gollrish Y Thie, and it had thought it might find another of its kind there. But then it had not, and the dragon grew maddened and breathed her fire out.

Harry swallowed. He knew one way to change that, to change things, but he had no way of knowing if the Dark song, and the dragon herself, would accept it. He could only ask.

He conjured an image in his head, and let it pour through his voice. The image was small, and hopped, and leaped, and flapped, and was not unlike the small rushing things that Woodhouse thought of all animals not part of itself as. He gave the dragon the image of hatchlings, hatchlings of her own blood, and wondered if she would accept that.

The dragon let out a roar that cascaded through a dozen harmonies, and made Harry's ears bleed and his eyes burn, and let him know that hatchlings of her own blood would be more than welcome; they were needed, necessary. She wanted to mate, wanted to lay, but she could not find a mate of her own kind anywhere in the world.

Harry sang understanding, peace, compromise. She would not find a mate of her own kind anywhere in the world. But before her building rage and despair could overwhelm her, he presented her with the image of the Hebridean Blacks on their isles. They lived near the cold, deep sea, where much food drifted and swam. They had males who had bellowed back to the phoenix song even as she had, and had been angered by the presence of a Light singer in the world. They were not her own kind, but perhaps they were close? Perhaps she would go there, and accept a mate, and produce hatchlings of her own, hatchlings of mingled blood?

The dragon thought about that, and then she turned her wings to the north.

Harry bent over her scales, still protected by phoenix fire that he kept from dying with sheer will, and breathed.

Falco followed the dragon on wide wings of his own, and wondered, in his heart of hearts, what this all meant.

There was no doubt in his mind that Harry needed to Declare. Of course he did. And then he went and alternated between Dark and Light as if he needed not to, and Falco did not see how he could do that and expect to get away with it. The Dark and the Light were amused with him right now, perhaps, and knew that he was so young that his bounding between them was no more than the gamboling of a spring lamb. But they would catch on, and they would not be amused, and they would demand that he choose one side or the other, and Harry would not be ready.

And he had used this alternating in a very dangerous manner, to tame a dragon who might have destroyed a city—who had appeared in front of very many Muggles, all of whom would have to be Obliviated. The sight of a dragon was sometimes blamed for causing the persecution of witches and wizards that had resulted in the separation of the magical world and the mundane one. Of all the sights in the magical world, the Muggles least knew how to cope with a dragon, how to accept what it would mean for them if creatures mightier than they were existed.

This was no game, this was no joke, and yet it had been treated as if it were a game and a joke. Harry had only won by a gamble that either Light or Dark—or his magic, stretched thin as it was—might have decided to put an end to at any time. This could not be allowed to continue, with the wizarding world and the balance Falco lived to preserve teetering on the edge of risk.

Falco made his choice. Harry valued free will more, and that put him closer to Light. And he carried a phoenix's voice in his body, and that meant that he actually carried a shard of the Light in his throat.

And despite Falco's efforts to help Tom, he was not getting better.

Therefore, Harry himself must be made to Declare for Light, and Falco himself would have to take the position of Dark Lord. He mourned it, but to keep the balance, sacrifices were sometimes necessary, and he would demand them of himself, too.

He thought he heard thunder rolling around him for a moment, and felt a general heaviness in the air, but then it was gone, and he concluded it must have been a manifestation of wild magic stirred up by the dragon. He shrugged his wings and continued following Harry and the British Red-Gold, wondering where Harry would finally set her down.

Harry was shivering with effort by the time the Hebrides finally came into view. That was not long as the dragon flew—and this dragon flew enormously fast and, at last, high, so that there was less chance of Muggles seeing her—but he had to fight to keep singing, to protect himself from her heat with his own flames, and to ignore the cold of the wind that whipped past him and wasn't impressed with the phoenix fire. Then his lungs started laboring because they were thousands of feet in the air, and Harry gave up counting the minutes or worrying about Muggles seeing them. He would sing to her and keep her calm enough to fix on the idea of a mate, instead.

The dragon slanted down, and Harry saw the isles appear below, out of the leaping sea. He saw Dragon-Keepers running in circles, and smiled wanly. Those would be the members of the MacFusty clan, the wizards native to the Hebrides, who tended their dragons and kept them from getting out of control. Of course, right now the Blacks were dangerously close to getting out of control, rearing and spreading their wings and flaunting themselves if they were male, or crouching low over their nests and snarling if they were female.

Acies wheeled once, and then dived straight down. A moment later, a Hebridean Black shook off the wizards trying to calm him as if they were nothing and rose to meet her. Acies spread her wings wide and roared, fanning flame between them, and he roared back, not seeming at all intimidated by her strange color or even stranger size.

Harry looked about for a moment, but he could see no convenient way for him to simply leap off, and he certainly didn't wait to stay on Acies's back during her mating. He lowered his gaze, fixed on a tiny rock among the lashing waves, and Apparated to it just as the Hebridean Black breathed, bathing Acies's talons in flames that only seemed to tickle her.

He appeared on the rock, and staggered, struggling to keep his balance on the water-slicked stone. He tried to grip with his hand, and then snatched it away again. The blisters were so painful that he'd be surprised if he were able to hold a quill for the next few days.

Good thing that I already signed that scroll with Scrimgeour, he thought, and then cast a Sticking Charm on his feet so that he would stay still and looked up.

His breath caught. The dragons were dancing above him, displaying for each other, their voices deep and booming music that made the stone beneath his feet vibrate. As Harry let his song and his flame die at last, he saw Acies rake her intended's back with fire. The Hebridean Black rolled and bit to put the flames out, and scratched her on her right foreleg. Blood drizzled into the ocean water, and Acies flew higher and spread her wings to show off their colors.

"Vates?"

Startled, Harry looked up. An older wizard was standing on a rock not far from him, little more than a stepping stone, his wand in his hand and a smile on his face. He wore thicker robes than Harry was accustomed to seeing, and his gray eyes were surrounded by lines from squinting into sun and rain. He had long, wild white hair that reminded Harry a bit of Moody's.

"My name's Gerald MacFusty," he said. "I wrote to Headmistress McGonagall at Hogwarts when the British Red-Gold woke and left us." He glanced up for a moment, as though he didn't know how not to watch the mating dragons, and then he shook his head and looked back at Harry. "I have long experience working with dragons," he said gently, "and know how to offer some healing for burns." He nodded to

Harry's hand, and, Harry realized, his legs. He had taken some burns before the phoenix fire managed to protect him. "Hold out your hand."

Harry gratefully did just that. As the pain in his hand eased, he found his gaze going back to the dragons. "They're wonderful, aren't they?" he asked.

"Oh, they are that." Gerald murmured an incantation Harry wasn't familiar with, and the dry pain in his legs eased. "We wish more people remembered that, both how beautiful and how dangerous they are." He leaned across the water between the rocks then and gripped Harry on the shoulder. Harry looked back into his face.

"Thank you for not killing her," Gerald said softly. "We feared you would have to, when she left."

"So did I," said Harry. "But she was bound with a sleeping spell, and then—well, I woke her up with my music today. I won't spread my voice around the Isles like that again without thinking of the consequences," he added.

"We know, lad." Gerald nodded to his feet. "Unstick them, then take my hand, and I'll make sure that you get some tea and something to eat before you have to go back south."

Harry murmured Finite Incantatem, and then heard Acies roar again. He looked up, shading his eyes with his hand, to see the dragons chasing each other, twining around each other in a spiral dance straight into the heart of the sun. A deep contentment spread through him.

She's still alive. She's still free. Sometimes, I can keep my promises.

Chapter Forty-One: Dawn and Dusk, Sun and Shadow

Draco paced. The Minister had invited them all inside the Ministry, and had invited Draco, Snape, and Helcas into his office. Draco had refused, though, preferring to have the space of a corridor where he could move back and forth as he needed to, his hands rubbing and clenching over one another and sometimes disordering his hair.

"You're making yourself look ridiculous, Draco." Narcissa was seated on a conjured chair with her back to the wall, her eyes trained on a book that Draco could have sworn she hadn't brought with her. "Do sit down. Take a few deep breaths. The air will not hurry away from you."

"And what would you do, if Lucius was flying Merlin knows where on a dragon?" Draco snapped at her.

Narcissa glanced up at him; her eyes were calm and cold, and her face had not the slightest sign of any emotion but irritation. "I would trust that he had a good reason for doing so, and would come back," she said. "You must trust your partner, Draco darling, or what good is the joining? He trusted you to make your own decision when Lucius threatened to disown you. From what you and he have said, he never once asked you to make the decision earlier than you did."

"But that was making a choice, and this is jumping on a dragon," Draco explained, thinking his mother didn't quite understand that. He would have remained outside, staring up into the sky, the way that some of Harry's other allies and the people who had come to witness the ceremony were doing, but that just made him feel a right idiot. He hated being a right idiot in front of people. At least he and his mother were the only ones in this corridor; Snape and Helcas were shut in the Minister's office with him. "That's a bit different, Mother."

"Is it?" Narcissa carefully marked her place in her book with an embroidered scrap of cloth that Draco was also sure she hadn't had earlier, and folded her hands primly over her knees. "Is it really, Draco? He trusted you. Do you trust him? He has gone off into danger before, and always come back. Besides," she added, with a bit more censure to her tone than Draco had heard so far, "whether

you are angry or not, it does not do to lose one's composure in public, my son. It shows your enemies that you have weaknesses."

"Everyone has weaknesses," Draco mumbled, and knew he was being childish. His face heated up. Grateful as he was to his mother for joining him in the rebellion and turning against Lucius to be with him, at the moment he wished she had never come at all. Not even Harry could make him feel as embarrassed and deeply ashamed as his mother did.

"But they don't always show them," said Narcissa, and the coldness in her voice had deepened. "I think you have gone too long without being reminded of that lesson." She sat up, and Draco had the uncomfortable vision of a great cat looking down its nose at him shortly before it set to eating him. "I will be the first to admit that you have strengths your father will never understand, Draco. But he has imparted wisdom to you as well, wisdom that you should make good use of. You are in a very public position as the spouse-to-be of a vates. Whether or not you wish to have it so, many eyes will be focused on you. And the son I raised would wish to have it so."

Draco sighed and tugged a hand through his hair, messing it up further, but unable to care right now. "I do want people to pay attention to me, Mother, but there's no one here right now." Even the Aurors who usually guarded the Minister's office had gone inside, perhaps because they didn't trust a goblin alone with their precious Scrimgeour; Draco wasn't sure. There were wards watching them, of course, but no passers-by.

"There is always someone watching," said Narcissa sharply. "Remember what I taught you about comportment, Draco. Why do some people practice all their lives for it and never achieve it?"

Draco could feel his flush deepening again. "Because it goes deeper than skin and bone," he muttered, letting the words be tugged from him. "Because someone who does not live grandeur in his mind will never live it in his body."

"Good," said Narcissa, with cold approval. "That is very good, Draco. You can do this. Your beloved is on a dragon riding to who-knows-

where, but the last time we saw him he was still alive, and he is one of the most powerful wizards in the world. Think about those things, rather than the fact that you do not know where he is.”

Draco nodded, and then began breathing with more regularity. He could feel the flush fading from his cheeks, and he drew his wand out and spelled his hair to lie flat again. He wondered what he had been thinking, as his emotions cleared from his head. They were in the Ministry, and in the Ministry, someone was always watching. It didn't matter whether his last name was Malfoy or Black, here, and it didn't matter whether Harry was on a dragon's back or gone to face Voldemort. He accomplished nothing for his own reputation or Harry's by losing his temper.

He heard footsteps around the corner just then, familiar footsteps. He looked sharply at his mother, only to find that she had heard them, too. But Narcissa didn't rise to her feet as he had expected. Instead, she sat where she was like a winter queen on her throne, ice in her hands and her eyes.

Lucius stepped around the corner and paused as if he had come on them suddenly. It was a very good performance. If he had been caught up in his ranting over Harry, Draco might even have been fooled.

Now, though, he could see how the performance was off, just a note or two. Lucius was feeling it in his skin and bone, but not his mind.

Draco drew himself up and offered a bow to his father. He was remembering lessons seared into his brain before he had ever started Hogwarts. He had not learned some of the older and less common pureblood rituals until he was thirteen, and then only thanks to Harry, but he knew the common ones. He gave Lucius the bow one would give a respected enemy, and saw his father's eyes linger on him a touch longer than they should have in response.

Then his father looked at his mother. Narcissa looked back.

And Draco saw what it was like when people of equal strength fought, and both of them knew why they were fighting.

“I have missed you in my home of late, Narcissa,” Lucius said, with politeness that Draco thought more appropriate to a dinner party. “I have sometimes turned a corner and expected you to be there, or held out my arm, expecting you to feel your hand on it, and encountered nothing but air.”

Narcissa did not even blink. “I have not missed your home, Lucius,” she said. “I have been living in a wooden house, and sleeping in a cramped room, and helping my son and my future son-in-law prepare for the changing of the wizarding world.”

Draco winced, but he had the sense to do it inwardly. Narcissa had not only refused whatever reconciliation Lucius was offering—though, knowing his father, Draco suspected it was only on his own terms that Lucius was offering one at all—but made the point that she was part of the political power structure around Harry and his father was not. She might have slapped him in public and done less damage.

“I have keen eyes,” said Lucius quietly. “I can see where the flow of power tends. And I have followed that flow, instead of locking myself in fetters to the useless, crumbling stone of structures whose time has passed.”

“I am happy for you, in your freedom,” said Narcissa. “I have chosen not to follow power. I have followed strength instead.”

Draco’s eyes darted back and forth from face to face, noting every line, every twitch, every hitch in their breathing. And he realized why Narcissa was winning. She believed absolutely in what she was saying. Body and mind said the same things. She had no regrets about her decision, because she had made the right one in the first place.

Lucius was trying to say he had made the wrong one without actually doing anything that would require him to back the statement up. And so, Draco thought, he was faltering, and far more hurt by Narcissa’s words than she was by his—if his hurt her at all. Draco thought they simply shattered against her stone.

Draco understood, at that moment, why hypocrisy was a bad thing. Not because the “good” people like Gryffindors claimed it was, but because saying one thing and believing another weakened one’s ability to act as if one were perfectly right. The contradiction existed beneath the surface no matter how furiously it was denied. Bringing them into alignment required a single smooth belief, no matter what lies one might tell others. One had either to tell the truth to himself or lie so smoothly that one could shift between lies at need.

Draco felt that understanding come over him as an epiphany for his particular situation—if he did not act as if eyes were watching even when they probably weren’t, then he would fail in front of actual eyes—and as a burst of contempt for his father.

He must have made some noise. Lucius’s eyes turned on him. “And you, Draco?” he asked, with a faint tremble of amusement in his voice. “Have you followed strength? Or would you give it another name?” The slight sneer to the words implied that he thought Draco would say something about following his heart.

“I would,” said Draco. “My mother, lovely as her phrasing was, missed two important words.” He could see Narcissa’s brows rise from the corner of his eye, but he was concentrating on Lucius, and could not spare the attention it would take to think properly about that. “I would say that I followed my own strength.”

Lucius frowned. “You know that are you still disowned,” he said almost pleasantly.

“I know that.” Draco managed to hold his voice and face blank, and even interject a tone of boredom into the former. He saw a slight twitch around Lucius’s mouth that indicated he knew he had lost.

He managed a graceful retreat, at least. “You might consider coming to Malfoy Manor for dinner,” he told Narcissa. “Or even a light lunch. The house elves miss being asked to cook the delicate dishes that you so preferred.”

“You may ask the house elves to prepare the dishes, of course,” said Narcissa. “And then put them on one side of the table in front of an

empty chair, while you sit across from them and stare at them. It would match the amount of conversation you would receive from me.”

Draco did not quite mask a laugh. Lucius’s gaze came to him, deadly as a scorpion’s sting, but he knew when he was beaten. With another slight bow to the both of them, he retreated around the corner.

Narcissa waited until the footsteps faded, then waved her wand in a subtle gesture that Draco knew meant she was checking for listening spells. She relaxed a moment later and turned to Draco.

“That is one useful thing that our alliance with Harry has taught me, at least,” she said. “That having one’s will all the time is not quite a good thing. He could have so much with a small compromise, but he is unwilling to name the compromise aloud, let alone ally with someone else, as you and I have done, on equal terms to win it. His pride is a hollow ice shell.”

Draco nodded slowly. The father he had once so admired was not a good guide, it seemed, in terms of either power or strength. “I must say that it does concern me.”

Rufus resisted the urge to press his hands across his brow and massage away the headache forming there. He remembered, fondly, the time when Severus Snape had been guilty of enough stupidity that Rufus could speak a few words and remind him that this was not how Slytherins behaved. Now Snape was behaving like a perfect Slytherin, ferreting out every possible suspicious term in the scroll he and Harry had signed, and suggesting ways in which they might turn to his ward’s disadvantage. Rufus had assured him that no one would choose members of the monitoring board overtly hostile to Harry; they couldn’t, when both Harry and Griselda Marchbanks as well as Aurora Whitestag would have to approve the choices. None of that kept Snape from twisting words back and forth and sideways to see if they held up, and pointing out if they didn’t.

“The scroll clearly says that all three must make the choice,” Rufus said now, in a deeply final voice. “I will not change that so that you can have a part in it, Mr. Snape.” He would have used the title

“Professor,” but since the man was no longer teaching, he didn’t deserve it.

“Did I ask you to?” Snape watched him with implacable dark eyes.

The stress must have been affecting Rufus more than he thought—that, or the impossible fact that Harry had signed their treaty and then flown off on one of the largest dragons the world had ever known. He didn’t demur with courtesies or backtrack and adhere to the letter instead of the spirit of Snape’s words. He didn’t even care that the northern goblin Helcas, originally invited into the office so that he and Rufus could discuss the terms of the Goblin Board, was watching them argue with a highly amused expression. He found himself saying, “You did in all but name. You may be present when they make the choices, if all three of them agree. Otherwise, no. You are Harry’s guardian, but Merlin knows that Mrs. Whitestag and Elder Marchbanks will treat him more like an adult.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed and his face paled, but he said nothing. Rufus seized the chance to turn away and nod to Helcas. “It seems only fair that there should be a member of each magical species the vates is concerned with on the board as well. What do you say, Helcas?” He had some hesitation about addressing the northern goblin by his first name instead of his clan name, but Griselda had cautioned him that the clan names were actually prized more by the goblins, and he should never call a member of a clan by one without explicit permission to do so.

The northern goblin’s eyes narrowed, and his claws flexed. Rufus watched his hand as unobtrusively as he could. He wondered if northern goblins really did wear their nails longer than southern goblins, or if the fact that he knew the goblin sitting across from was free from any magical constraint made him notice them more.

“We do not wish to control our vates,” said Helcas at last. “But nether do we wish anyone else to control him. Yes, I will accept a position on the monitoring board, to make sure the power is not being abused.”

Rufus blinked a bit. “If all three approve you, of course,” he said.

“But you said that there should be a goblin on the board,” said Helcas, looking directly at him. “Obviously, you mean to have a hand in the process, Minister, if only in the selection of candidates. And those of my people who are with me now will refuse to stand for consideration. So yes, I will serve on the board.”

Snape’s amused gaze was all too heavy. Rufus nodded sharply, and hoped that his embarrassment wasn’t obvious. “Then we should—“

“There is another clause in the treaty that I had questions about,” said Snape pleasantly.

Rufus forced himself to smile.

Aurora Whitestag sat with her hands neatly folded in front of her, and listened to the others talk. She wondered that no one else around her seemed to notice that they would win as much by silence as by words.

“—can’t let that change things!” Philip was saying sharply. Aurora cast him a slow glance of pity. His grief for his daughter had long since mutated into a striving after empty vengeance. In some ways, she thought the monitoring board would be a relief for him, even though he wouldn’t be able to sit on it, because he would have to find something else to do with his life. “Just because he flew away today on a dragon doesn’t mean he’s a hero or anything like it.”

“You don’t see things from our point-of-view.” Lisa Addlington stood with her hands on her hips, trying to smile at Philip and failing. Aurora nodded a little. Lisa was useful, but she did have little tolerance for poor Philip and his inability to understand the most basic facts of the wizarding world. “No one else could have done this. And he will be remembered for this. And what he did was an explosion of glory that not even the Ministry might be able to contain from the Muggle world.” The Obliviators had been sent out, Aurora knew, but if people weren’t babbling about seeing a dragon, she doubted they would find all the Muggles who had. “And he obviously didn’t arrange for this—“

“Of course he did,” Philip snapped.

"You can't control a dragon that way, even if you're a Dragon-Keeper." Lisa's patience was obviously cracking. "You just can't." Aurora had the feeling that she barely kept herself from adding, "Muggle." "So I believe that he accidentally summoned the dragon with his song this morning, or attracted her because he's—I don't know, attractive to dragons. There was something about it in the Daily Prophet last year, I think." She shook her head and looped a curl of her hair around her finger, as if to prevent herself from saying something she'd regret. "This wasn't a publicity stunt. It is an act of heroism that's going to make him look even better than he used to in the eyes of the wizarding world. We have to change with that, move with the times."

Lisa was probably the smartest of all of them, Aurora thought, standing. She made a good second-in-command.

Their eyes came to her at once. She was the one who had worked hard to make sure that they got at least this much from Harry. She was the one who led them. She was the one who had argued Philip into seeing that a monitoring board was better than a trial that would probably release Harry back into the world anyway, because most of the Wizengamot considered him a brave little abused boy or someone too powerful to anger.

No one was too powerful to anger, Aurora thought. That seemed to be something that wizards and witches who followed Light and Dark had trouble comprehending. Aurora was glad now that she had never Declared, though her own ideals were closer to the Light than anything else. If one saw something wrong, then one had to confront and fix that problem. One didn't cower because the wizard in question was magically powerful, or the Minister, or vates.

"Harry won't want to use the publicity," she told them with absolute certainty. "It will still exist and influence people's opinions of him, of course, but that doesn't mean he'll consider it a weapon. So we can use it to promote the monitoring board instead. These are the men and women willing to mentor and guide a young man who can ride a dragon and prevent her from destroying the city of London. He is the strength, but we are the power."

They listened to her—except Lisa. Aurora liked Lisa. She pulled and champed at the bit, and her son had died beside the lake, too, so that she had moral authority equal to Aurora's. And rebellion was good, Aurora thought. It was a sign that other people were thinking about this. "Do you really think that'll work? The Daily Prophet will just want to run stories on him. They won't ask us."

"Of course they will." Aurora lifted her eyebrows. "Why wouldn't they? We're witnesses. More to the point, we're witnesses that can tell connected, coherent stories, with pithy and pretty phrases, about what happened."

Lisa smiled abruptly. "And we're the ones who'll remain close to him, so that we can help manage his public reputation. It's not a duty that he wants the trouble of assuming, so why shouldn't it be left up to his advisors?"

Aurora inclined her head. "Quite." It sometimes appalled her, how little Harry cared about what he appeared like to others. His reputation would have galloped quite out of control in the past few months, especially among Light wizards, if she hadn't worked to pull them all together into some kind of unified response, and sometimes given interviews to the Daily Prophet when they asked. It wasn't about telling the truth, of course, or not just that. It was about saying things that looked good in print and helped sell newspapers.

It had been quite fascinating, to read about what a vates was and how Harry could be one, and to understand what the consequences of that were going to be for the wizarding world. It sometimes seemed to Aurora that Harry's parents and Albus Dumbledore had set out to breed themselves a vates. They'd required not only a powerful wizard, or a powerful wizard in love with freedom, but a powerful wizard in love with freedom and willing to limit himself so that others could flourish when necessary.

Interesting. So interesting. Aurora was determined that Harry not be left to run wild, for the good of the wizarding world, but it would be interesting, too, where she would have thought the task might have contained inherent boredom.

And she, unlike Dumbledore and Harry's parents, would see what was in front of her. Harry had changed from the boy he was, into a young man who simply needed more of an introduction to principles of Light and restraint, and less of the guiding hand on the reins that he might have required if the monitoring board had been added last year. As he changed, those who hoped to keep up must change with him.

She could do that. She didn't understand what was so hard about it. Hawthorn couldn't help her gaze straying up to the sky, even though it had been hours since Harry and the dragon had vanished, and twilight was creeping over the buildings of London now. She had remained in the alley outside the Ministry when most of the others went inside or departed, not having any fondness for the building where she had spent three days without Wolfsbane, magic, or freedom.

She had had no time to think when the dragon appeared. She had gaped, and then Harry had raised the Shield Charm against the flames, and then he had vanished and reappeared on the dragon's back. And then he had glowed with blue flames of his own, and his song had raised and soothed the Dark and the Light, and then the dragon had flown away.

Hawthorn clenched her hands so hard that her nails dug into her palms and the blood ran. A few of the others still waiting, Peregrine and Trumpetflower in particular, glanced over at her, sniffing as they smelled the blood. Then they caught the expression on her face and turned away.

There was no reason that this should be so hard on her personally, other than the reason it was hard for everyone: they could not be sure that Harry was alive or dead.

Except that it was, and Hawthorn grabbed it and dragged it into the sunlight—or the deepening twilight—and held it there until she figured it out. Then she wished she hadn't.

I am a maze of contradictions lately, she thought, and in the back of her mind, her wolf howled, demanding blood and vengeance for Claudia.

He didn't kill her, though he could have, and it would probably have been better for everyone in the end. He leaped onto her back and argued with her—or communed with her—and then took her away. He's probably taking her somewhere she can't interfere with the wills and freedom of others.

It didn't matter that the ceremony to end the rebellion was today, and that the monitoring board has to be established, and that we're all waiting for him. He wasn't going to kill her just because of that. He made time for her, and he's going to make time for similar things in the future. He might get impatient or angry, but he'll make time for them.

And I was going to devote my life to vengeance from now on.

Hawthorn shut her eyes until they hurt her like her clenched hands. She had said she was a pureblood witch. She had thought that, when Harry came and rescued her from Tullianum. She had said that she was going to be that when she wore silver ornaments to Draco Malfoy's festival confirming him as magical heir last year, and didn't care about the burns they left on her skin.

And her enemies mistreated her and wounded her, and she lost a packmate, and suddenly all she was, again, was a werewolf?

She had said she would not let them define her. And then she had let them do it.

A deep current of shame ran through Hawthorn. She had thought a few days ago that she did not bear Harry's burdens, and was glad of it, because if she were as busy as he was, she would have no time to work on the werewolf cure. Now she wondered why her life should revolve around the werewolf cure, or around getting vengeance for a fellow werewolf.

There is more to me than that. That is what Harry has remembered. There is more to him than sixteen-year-old boy, or Lord-level wizard, or abused child, or even vates. And there is more to me than werewolf, and more than pureblood witch, and more than someone who must seek vengeance for Claudia because no one else will.

My life didn't end when my husband died. My life didn't end when my daughter died. My life didn't end when I was bitten. And I would have ended it now, because I would have broken the Alliance oaths with Harry, and I would have broken the formal family oath—her hand traced the scar on her left arm, cutting across the Dark Mark—because I wanted to drown myself in bitterness and hatred.

She shook her head and let out a slow breath. Perhaps the time is coming when I can't recover from something like this, when I won't be able to do anything but surrender to the flow of events. But it's still not yet. I can still rise above this. I'm strong enough.

And then Harry Apparated into the alley.

The others stirred, including Camellia, whom Peregrine and Trumpetflower had snarled at until she stopped howling. But Hawthorn was the one who stepped forward and enfolded Harry in a deep embrace.

Harry blinked at her, but certainly didn't object to the hug, and even curled an arm around her neck in tentative response. "Mrs. Parkinson, are you all right?" he asked. "I'm sorry that it took so long, but I literally couldn't think of anything else to do, and then I had to recover from the flight with the MacFusty wizards, and then I had to come back by multiple Apparitions. I didn't want to try to cover the whole distance in one leap."

"Thank you, Harry," Hawthorn said softly into his ear.

"For saving your life?" Harry's puzzlement grew more pronounced. "I—of course, Mrs. Parkinson."

“Call me Hawthorn, please.” Perhaps that would help anchor her, help her remember that for all the loss and sorrow she had sustained, including the loss of her family, she was still alive.

Harry might have sensed something of the reasons behind her request, because he didn’t protest anything about politeness. He went still against her instead, then whispered, “Very well, Hawthorn,” and put his hand on her left arm, covering oath scar and Dark Mark both.

She stepped back then, and let his packmates swirl about their alpha, muttering and licking, and Bone come up to shake his hand. Peregrine was stiffer—in some part of herself, Hawthorn thought, she still remembered that the vates had not been able to save her pack—but she nodded to him and murmured something about being glad to see him back safe.

Werewolves are not rational when they lose packmates, Hawthorn thought, watching her. And that was what I was doing. Indulging my wolf’s rage, instead of my own grief. I will have to ask how an accepted werewolf mourns. Her gaze went sideways, to Camellia, who stood watching Harry with a rapturous expression. I am sure that some of them will not mind telling me.

“Harry!” a voice shouted from the telephone box.

It was Draco. Hawthorn stepped back and watched, smiling, unable to decide if she were more amused or pleased to be a witness to this. Harry swallowed nervously as he caught a glimpse of Draco’s face. It was almost-composed, now, but pulses of other emotions moved under it, and his hair was disarrayed, if only from the wind of his run as he moved through the Ministry. Harry wondered how he had known he was back, and then told himself it was probably simple coincidence. Draco had come up to see if he’d arrived, and found him here.

“Draco,” he said, and then he took a deep breath and forced out the notion that he might have to accept a scolding. I cannot live in fear of them. He walked forward, so quickly that he seemed to startle Draco,

and then caught him in an embrace and kissed his cheek, while Draco blinked.

He recovered quickly, of course.

"You heroic idiot," he breathed into Harry's ear. "Will you ever stop doing things like that?" His words had a certain wistful tone to them.

Harry swallowed and replied honestly. "I'm not sure, Draco. Probably not. I see what the best solution is, and I tend to do that without a lot of discussion."

"That's one reason that you need me, then." Draco's arms tightened around Harry's waist hard enough that Harry grunted as he was pulled forward and against his boyfriend's body. "To make you see why discussion is important, and help you plan ahead of time when possible." His hand ran through Harry's hair. "And to try to prevent situations like this from happening," he added waspishly.

"I know," Harry whispered. "And—I know it hasn't happened much in Woodhouse, Draco, but I hope that the next few months of my life will be at least a little quieter. And I'd like advice on how to live with the monitoring board, how to move in politics, how to make decisions without letting my emotions influence me. The last thing has happened too often."

Draco remained silent for a moment. Then he said. "I can do the first two, but what makes you think I'd be any good at the third?"

Harry had to pull away from him enough to see his face properly—a little hard to do in the falling night. "Because you are," he said. "You waited and made the decision to come to me rationally, Draco. I was pleased about it, of course, but you pleased yourself, and not me or your father. You have a strength of will that I admire. Didn't you know that? One reason I love you is that you're so strong. It's a strange strength, sometimes." He was smiling. He didn't want to, because it was such a serious subject and he didn't want Draco to think he was making fun of him, but it seemed inevitable. "It manifests in being petulant, or shrieking at me when anyone else would lower their eyes and pretend everything was fine, or sulking when most people would

try to keep their emotions concealed. But it's always there, no matter how it's disguised. And when it rises purely to the surface, I don't think there's a thing in the world that can stop you or make you afraid."

Draco's voice trembled when he spoke, and so did his hand as he reached out to stroke Harry's hair. "I had no idea you thought that."

Harry felt shame squirm in his stomach. "You didn't? Merlin, Draco, I'm so sorry." He squeezed his hand and met his eyes. "I'll try to say it more often. I forget that just because I think it and it seems obvious to me doesn't mean other people know it."

Draco dragged him into a kiss without saying anything else. Harry forced himself to forget about their audience, and the fact that they still had details of the monitoring board to work out and his enemies would be waiting for him, and became an equal participant in the kiss, rather than just letting it happen.

Under his enjoyment, he had a new determination.

His strength is not always self-confidence, then. I did forget that. I want him to see how much more he means to me than he might think he does. There's no reason that he should always be the one to give attention and time and words and kisses. I can give that back just as well. Harry reinforced the determination with stubbornness. And from now on, that's what's going to happen.

Chapter Forty-Two: The Monitoring Board

Harry wasn't surprised when the werewolves didn't follow him inside the Ministry. The moon would be rising soon, and though they'd taken Wolfsbane, confined corridors were not the best place for several large wolves. Harry did think about riding back up in the telephone box to charm them invisible so that no Ministry lackeys or Muggles would take it into their heads to hunt them, but Draco's arm closed around his waist when he mentioned that plan.

"Laura Gloryflower's with them, Harry," he said calmly. "Or was. I saw her walking around the corner of the alley just as the telephone box started to lower us. She'll Apparate them back to Woodhouse, charm them invisible, or do whatever else needs to be done."

Harry pondered that for a moment, then nodded and relaxed back against Draco's arm. "You're right," he said. "I should be thinking more about facing Whitestag and the parents of the Dozen Who Died, shouldn't I?"

Draco gave him an odd look.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," Draco murmured, though the look on his face was so odd that Harry thought it had to be more than nothing. But he gave Harry silence, so they reached the Atrium without Harry becoming any wiser.

There, they found Aurora Whitestag waiting for them. A few other men and women stood behind her, people Harry didn't know, but he found it hard to look at anyone save her. He wasn't sure if that was the result of magic, the importance he knew she would hold in his life in the future, charisma, or all three. She was one of those people who could command attention by the way she stood, though, and she was doing it now.

"Hello, Madam Whitestag," said Harry, deciding that formality was the best way to handle her. If nothing else, it would show that he wasn't reluctant to offer her respect, and she did technically hold a title now

that she was part of the monitoring board. "I am sorry to have kept you waiting. The British Red-Gold is settled in the Hebridean Black sanctuary now."

One of the women behind Aurora started to say something uncomplimentary, but Aurora held up a hand, and she fell silent. Harry studied her eyes. They were dark and serene. I will have to learn what invisible leashes she has everyone else on, Harry decided. Is the basis of her control the way she speaks? What she thinks? What she knows? Or something else? He knew it couldn't be magical power. Aurora was considerably less powerful than Snape, and perhaps even weaker than Draco was, though any comparison of a teenage wizard and an adult wizard was hard to make.

"It is of no moment, Harry," said Aurora gently. "What matters is that you're here now, and willing to work with me and Madam Marchbanks to choose the members of the monitoring board. I trust that you are ready to work with us?"

Harry nodded firmly. He was very tired, having been up two days and one night now, but he wouldn't let himself think of it, or use his magic, which might go wonky with his weariness. He would make the best decisions he could, and listen to Madam Marchbanks if he had any doubts.

"Good." Aurora smiled at him and turned towards a small door Harry hadn't seen before, located in a corner of the Atrium not far from the gates. He'd always thought there were only Floo connections there, for Ministry employees to come in and out. The small gathering of witches and wizards behind Aurora followed her steps, so Harry and Draco did, too. He was aware of some of the strangers looking askance at Draco's arm around his waist. Harry ignored that. They could think what they liked. If it crossed into the realm of action or words, he would sit on them.

One of the women did open her mouth, but Aurora glanced back, caught her eye, and shook her head.

She's dangerous. She must have heard a small gasp, felt a twitch, something. I'll have to be careful how I deal with her. Harry worked up

as much resolve as he could. A night without sleep wasn't his greatest problem, here. The sheer variety of experiences the day had offered him was. He had sung a phoenix song, signed a treaty signaling the end of a rebellion, ridden a dragon north, and Apparated back to the Ministry again. Now he was going to negotiate, which was something he hadn't done so far today. Harry thought he would have preferred to ride another dragon.

He reminded himself that, looked at in a certain light, this was riding a dragon. He had to keep track of shifting currents of wind and the dragon's flame, and ignore certain other things that were not as important. He was quite sure that Aurora would manage to sneak certain conditions past him, or have people on the board that Harry would not have chosen for himself, because they seemed neutral on the surface and truly weren't. But what he wanted was to make sure that he had some Light wizards in the Alliance, that they swore the oaths, and that they would not unduly restrict him from his vates tasks.

For that, he could put up with—

And then Draco set his feet and shook his head, perforce pulling Harry to a stop as well. Harry blinked at Draco. The room they were about to enter looked perfectly ordinary. There was a long table in the center of it, surrounded by carved chairs that Harry thought had been conjured; they were too fine for the normal run of Ministry furniture. Madam Marchbanks sat at one end, in the middle of a cluster of three seats. Harry knew that he and Aurora would take the other two.

"What's the matter?" he asked Draco.

"Professor Snape isn't here," Draco said.

Harry blinked again, then said, "No one said that Snape would be choosing the members of the monitoring board—"

"But he can be present when you choose them," said Draco flatly. "And he bloody well will, Harry, or I'm hitting you with a sleeping charm now." He said the last in such a fierce whisper that Harry was fairly sure no one else heard him.

A hissing trail of yellow light curled around Harry's fingers—his magic getting out of control with his temper. He tamed it. He didn't want to hurt someone. And the more he thought about it, the more he winced at the thought of Snape being left out of these negotiations. He would think Harry had chosen guardians to spite him. And he would certainly distrust most of them, and examine the wording of the treaty again and again, looking for sore spots.

"Very well," he said, and shrugged apologetically at Aurora as she turned around to look at him. "Sorry, Madam. I want to call my guardian and make sure that he can join us and speak for me."

"I would prefer that you not call him," Aurora replied, voice just this side of censure. "He intimidated several of my people merely by his appearance in the alley today. I fear we will not make fair, unbiased decisions if he is in the room with us."

Harry started to reply, but Draco's voice got there first, harsh and cold as grinding ice floes. "Harry is sixteen," he said. "Not of age yet by the common wizarding standard. And Professor Snape is his guardian. He will be with him for something this important. You should know this, Madam Whitestag, since you are, after all, a stickler for rules, and laws, and justice."

Aurora studied Draco for a long moment, then said, "I'm well aware of Harry's age, Mr. Black." She nodded to Harry. "Summon your guardian, then."

Harry tapped his left wrist and murmured the communication spell, and heard Snape's voice respond at once, tight and eager as a racing hound's. "Harry? You have returned?"

"Yes, sir. I'm in the doorway of a small room in the Atrium—"

"I know it. I am coming." And the communication spell cut off. Harry could feel himself flushing dully under Aurora's eye. She did not look condemning, not precisely, but he felt rather like a student who had insisted on having his parents with him when he faced the Headmistress over a minor infraction of Hogwarts rules.

“The last I heard of Professor Snape, he was rather—upset,” said Aurora, with the air of one hunting for a delicate word and finally settling on an inadequate substitute for what she really meant. “Are you sure it’s wise to have him in a room with other people who might make you feel uncomfortable even if they don’t mean to, Harry?”

Harry sighed. “He’s past that now, in large part, Madam. And Draco is right. I’m sixteen, and my guardian should be with me.”

Aurora said nothing, but simply stood with them, obviously more than willing to wait. Her companions had filed past her and found themselves seats about the table. Harry struggled not to shift from foot to foot, or, for that matter, to lean against Draco as if seeking comfort. He had to impress these people, so he stood as straight as he could and with as much of a cold expression on his face as he could muster. It was easier once he remembered what Lily might have told him to do if he was in a case concerning Connor, and then the self-consciousness fell away. He wrapped himself in a cold shell, and nothing could hurt him.

It truly did not take long for Snape’s footsteps to sound up beyond the gates, and then he was there, his eyes flitting over Harry’s face as though looking for signs of damage taken in the hours since they had parted. Then his left hand gripped Harry’s shoulder. Harry managed to conceal his start, but he’d been gone far enough into the coldness that being touched felt strange.

And he knew Snape was keeping his right hand free so that he could use his wand. That annoyed him.

“Let us begin,” said Snape. “Helcas and the others who wish to be considered for membership in the monitoring board are following me, but they said that they wanted to speak with the Minister first, and they care little about which humans sit the board. They are more interested in those humans’ actions. Attempting to control their vates, for example.”

Aurora gave Snape a flat, unreadable look, and gestured into the room. “After you, Mr. Snape.”

Aurora had to admit to being rather nonplused as they all finally, finally, sat down at the table where they should have sat the moment Harry Apparated in. The reports she had received from Hogwarts said that Snape was a broken man. Everyone agreed on it, students from all four Houses. He could barely teach Potions. He certainly could not defend the vates he claimed as his son in an environment like this. Since he would cast curses at everyone who looked at him sideways, Aurora was within her rights to ask for him to be excluded.

And now, this. Aurora didn't think his façade was perfect; there was strain that might show if he was pressed. But she did think that he would watch their candidates so closely that some of the people she needed on the monitoring board might not make it. He would object to any Light wizard, almost certainly.

So vexing.

But she knew how to respond to vexation. One stepped back and thought of new plans. And so she watched as Harry moved to the head of the table to take the chair on the left side of Madam Marchbanks, while his guardian and his lover sat on the left of him. She saw the yawn that Harry could not quite conceal, and the way his partner all but bent over him, and the mistrustful looks that Snape was giving everyone in the room, even those undeclared witches and wizards who were here because they thought the safety of the wizarding world a good idea.

Aurora smiled a bit. It may be true that Harry is sixteen years old and needs his guardian with him, but he is an adult in that he makes adult decisions, and we are granting him an adult part in the monitoring board and the selection of its members. He doesn't need to be shepherded, or watched as if he were going to break an arm on the way to his chair.

Treat Harry like an adult, insist on his opinions and not the opinions of his guardian and lover, and Aurora thought this would work. Harry was obviously tired, and would miss some things. That meant that the monitoring board could do what it needed to do, rather than what Snape and Lucius's son wanted it to do.

Aurora shut the door and moved around the table to take the chair on Marchbanks's right.

"I think we should begin with consideration of Light wizards," said Madam Marchbanks. "Since, after all, part of the original purpose of this monitoring board is to introduce more Light wizards into the vates's councils."

Draco sat back in his chair, his eyes narrowed. He couldn't quite stop looking at Whitestag—he knew she was up to something—but he forced himself to. The first candidate was sitting up at the end of the table, consciously shifting in her chair. This was obviously something the Light's running dogs had planned. And Harry wasn't ready to deal with this yet, Draco thought, as Harry concealed another yawn. He should have been in bed.

But they would insist on this now, and even fully conscious, Harry might have allowed through some of the witches and wizards Snape and Draco would disqualify. That was all right. That was one reason they were here: to be the suspicious Slytherin bastards Harry couldn't be when he was making a good faith effort.

"I agree," said Whitestag. "And the first candidate of the Light is Lisa Addlington."

"Is this wise?" Snape asked, even before Draco could raise an objection. "I know that Mrs. Addlington's son died beside the lake." He gave her a shallow nod that couldn't really be interpreted as sympathy, Draco thought. "Grief may drive her to make her decisions, rather than interest in the safety of the wizarding world or my son."

"I think I may speak for myself, thank you," said Addlington, with a sniff. Draco didn't like her. Not only was she Declared for Light, but she had a manner of tossing her head that he thought was affected. Only much younger women should do that, and Addlington's face wasn't of the pureblood, elegant mode that would allow a witch like Narcissa to get away with the dramatic expression she was trying now. "I will not allow grief for my dead son to control my actions. I do

think that power should be used safely and responsibly, always, and what happened beside the lake was neither safe nor responsible.”

“Do you know what happened there?” Snape’s voice was low, and remarkably ugly, Draco thought. “If you had the slightest idea—“

“I think Mrs. Addlington knows,” said Draco, with a faint smile at the witch and a warning shake of his head at Snape. They would accomplish nothing if all they did was insult the lapdogs of the Light. “But I am less clear why she should be a member of the monitoring board. Having lost a child is qualification enough?” He put a politely inquiring frown on his face and looked at Whitestag.

She was watching him as though she were really noticing him for the first time. Draco resisted the temptation to preen or stretch at the attention.

She may see me as dangerous now, but I’ll be even more so if I don’t let on that I noticed her noticing.

“Mrs. Addlington has lost a child,” said Whitestag, with a degree of control that made Draco wonder how she could stand to surround herself with all these fools. She was a pureblood witch with composure Lucius might envy, or at least the ability to pretend to it. It must hurt, to see the rest of her circle so unskilled in acting. “And she is of the Light. And she is committed to the future change of the wizarding world.” Her eyes grew half-lidded, and her voice took on the tone of a mother scolding her child. “And I must ask, Mr. Black, that you refrain from interfering. The final decision for each member of the monitoring board must be made by Madam Marchbanks, the vates, and myself.”

Draco didn’t allow himself to react to the last name she’d given him. It was true that, technically, until Lucius confirmed him as his legal heir again, Draco’s last name was his mother’s. Most wizards, however, would be courteous enough to ignore that and refer to Draco by the last name he’d been born to. Whitestag was making a point.

He made one back. “I was unaware that objecting to a possible choice not yet made by the monitoring board constituted interfering,”

he said. "Strange, that critical thinking and the Light seem so often hostile to one another."

"Draco, please," said Harry, with weariness in his tone that made Draco look sharply at him. His eyes were shadowed, but he watched Lisa Addlington keenly enough. "I'd at least like Mrs. Addlington to explain what kind of commitments she's made to future changes in the wizarding world."

"I've continued to invest my money in Gringotts, despite the new demands made by the southern goblins," Addlington said stoutly. "I do think that humans and magical creatures should live together, not apart. I've tried to persuade some of the other parents who lost children to Harry's magic that taking vengeance wouldn't do any good, because he's the Boy-Who-Lived, and we need him."

Draco bristled. He saw Harry blink once, as if absorbing the blow of her words, and then nod. "You have the knowledge that you'll be required to work with magical creatures, at least," he said. "And that is a prerequisite for swearing the oaths of the Alliance and becoming part of the monitoring board. Will you swear the oaths now, even before you become part of it?"

"I will," said Addlington, and drew a knife from a pocket in her robes.

Draco could almost feel Snape getting ready to breathe a curse beside him. Harry forestalled them both. "Mrs. Addlington," he said, "we do not swear by blood in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. It might create an unfortunate precedent. We use words alone."

The woman blinked at him, and Draco was at least pleased that Harry had managed to disconcert her on his own. "What are the oaths, then?" she asked slowly, laying down the knife. "And what are the consequences for breaking them?"

"I will drain your magic," said Harry. As the first time he had said it, Draco was terribly impressed by the level tone Harry managed in that threat. He could do it, and he would do it. He had no need for elaborate torture.

“I understand,” said Mrs. Addlington. “And the oaths?”

Harry sat up. Draco could almost see him throwing weariness off like a cloak. A bit of his magic woke up and curled about his shoulders in a blanket of pale mist. Whitestag drew back from him, Draco was pleased to note. He should be the only one who found Harry’s magic not frightening at all.

“I swear to be part of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow until I can in good conscience be part of it no longer. I swear to hold loyalty and allegiance to my allies, no matter who they are, no matter how much magic they have, no matter what kind of magic they use. I swear to hold the space of my own mind sacred, to make decisions as best as I can based on thought instead of reaction, to test my own beliefs until they shatter or until they prove themselves solid. I swear not to let fear rule me. I swear to walk among interacting freedoms, to study the impact of my own free will on others’, and to think of the consequences of my actions.”

Harry said that all as if he were delivering a self-evident truth—the way that he probably thought of the Grand Unified Theory, Draco thought, with a slight grimace. But this wasn’t the Grand Unified Theory. This was an oath that he had sworn himself, and held to, when he made his decision, and not out of fear. The more Draco thought about it, the more he could see that he’d sworn to and kept those oaths. He wondered if Addlington would be able to say the same.

Falteringly, Addlington repeated the words, guided patiently through them by Harry. Draco concealed his sneer as best he could. No, she’s not worthy of the title of pureblood, not if she can’t memorize something that simple in a few seconds.

When that was done, Harry smiled at her. “Welcome to the Alliance. I do want more Light wizards and witches within it.” He turned to Madam Marchbanks. “Do you have any objections to her, Madam?”

Broodingly, the old woman studied Addlington and then reluctantly shook her head. She wanted to protect Harry’s safety, Draco thought,

but that was hard when he seemed out to sabotage it. He knew exactly how she felt.

“Good,” said Harry. “Lisa Addlington is accepted as a member of the monitoring board, then.”

Draco saw Whitestag smile, and he wanted to say something. But he could never have come up with the words that Snape did a moment later, the perfect words to stop the stupid choices in their tracks.

“Perhaps we should define the extent of the monitoring board’s supervision?” Snape murmured. “How much it might oversee Harry’s actions, how much he must consult with them, what they reserve the right to veto and what they do not?”

“I think that an excellent idea,” said Whitestag. “And since there is so far only one accepted member of the monitoring board, beyond the three of us who make the decisions, I think it appropriate that all other candidates, as well as those involved in, ah, overseeing the process, wait outside the room.”

Harry could see what Aurora was doing. He was a bit surprised that it had taken her so long to object to Draco and Snape’s presence, really.

He met her eyes and said pleasantly, “Really, now, Madam, I see no reason for that. This monitoring board, and the fact that it exists and will help me make decisions to control my behavior, is a matter of public record. We do not need to keep its function and the extent of its power secret.”

Aurora hesitated for the briefest of moments, but she must have already chosen her tactic, because she moved swiftly. “Of course, you are right, Harry,” she murmured. “I only thought that, as an adult and someone who is capable of making adult decisions, you would prefer to have such private matters, well, private. The relationship between a leader and his advisers is rather intimate. Adults do not need to be disciplined in public.”

Make me seem and feel like a child, Harry thought. And leave me with no other option but to send Snape and Draco away, if I don't want to look weak. Clever. But she should have done it earlier. Draco already set this context up by demanding that Snape be here, as my legal guardian, and she was the one who emphasized my age when she spoke to the paper.

"As you have so often said, Madam, I cannot be trusted to act on my own as yet," he said, flavoring his voice with regret. "If I were completely adult, then I would have found some way out of the situation by the lake, and I would have no need of the monitoring board at all. As it is, I am only a sixteen-year-old with power, both magical and political, far beyond what might be expected of someone my age, and I need adult guidance and help. That includes the guidance and help of the adult I trust most." He leaned backwards towards Snape without taking his eyes off Aurora. "And, of course, if the other candidates truly want to become part of the monitoring board, they need to know what their duties will be."

Aurora didn't show any sign of defeat. Harry hadn't thought she would. She simply nodded, as though she had expected everything to work out like this all along, and murmured, "Of course, vates. And now, how much adult guidance and help do you think is necessary to control your actions?"

Finally. Harry kept himself from breathing a sigh of relief, but it was a near thing. This was another reason he had been able to agree to the suggestion of a monitoring board where he hadn't been able to agree to the suggestion of a trial. Standing before the Wizengamot for crimes he could not convince himself were crimes would be a farce and add nothing to his vates task in the end. But a monitoring board could help him by giving him extra pairs of eyes when he began to tread a downward slope.

"I have made decisions that I would consider to be wrong," said Harry. "Sometimes, as beside the lake, I do not know what right decision I could have made. But another pair of eyes, or several pairs, could help me see a way out of this. Recognize the limits of personal power, and show me where integrity lies. Teach me where illegal is not another word for 'the whim of those in power,' but does happen to

coincide with 'moral.' Show me aspects of Light pureblood culture I might have ignored in my haste to embrace the Dark."

"Forgive me, Harry," said Aurora, voice low and smooth and concerned. "I was convinced that you were familiar with Light pureblood culture, as your father is a Light pureblood wizard."

Harry shook his head, and ignored the way Snape's hand tightened on his shoulder. There was nothing he could do about Snape's personal dislike of James right now. "Not in detail, Madam. Lily Potter never thought I had to learn the specific rituals, because I would not need them to build alliances with other families. Connor's dedication to the Light would be enough."

"Then teaching you those courtesies and rituals must be part of the duties of the board, of course," Aurora murmured. "And having myself and Mrs. Addlington on it may teach you ways out of decisions like the one you made by the lake. I have to admit, Harry, I have been over the situation many times in my own mind, and I do not see what else you could have done." She ignored the muted noises from some of the other people in the room, keeping her gaze on Harry. "So I believe the problem is one of fundamentals. We should not have depended on you so much in the first place. You should not have had to take up a burden better settled on the shoulders of adults."

Harry could hear the passion in her voice, and suspected she was telling the truth. She was not blinded by the Boy-Who-Lived legend, then, or at least she was more than aware of the Boy part.

"I wish I had not had to," he said simply. "But I am vates now, and leader of the Alliance, and several other positions that I cannot give up. The monitoring board will not ask me to do that."

"Of course not," said Aurora, and Harry realized that had not been a concern for her. He would have to judge her more carefully, he reminded himself, so that he could learn more about what she wanted and not what he thought she wanted. "We will ask you to come to us when you make decisions that could have political consequences in the wizarding world. If you move specifically within a single magical creature species, that is not a problem. But since you are a political

leader at such a tender age, you need the wisdom of older and more political wizards.”

Harry stifled his impatience. She is only right, only speaking from a position of truth as she sees it. “And what about those decisions that must be made quickly, Madam? I could hardly have consulted with the whole monitoring board about leaping onto the dragon’s back today.”

“Ah,” said Aurora. “But if we handle this correctly, such situations will become less frequent, Harry. I do not think it ridiculous to ask that when you hear about something happening at a distance—for example, a dragon raiding in Ireland, if such a disaster ever happens—that you come to us and ask.”

“Even if stopping the dragon would have no political consequences for the wizarding world?” Harry asked.

“Of course,” said Aurora. “Because your death would have enormous political consequences for us all, Harry. A negotiation or a web-lifting within a magical creature species, as I understand it, does not endanger your life. But a situation that threatens your safety? Yes, I think I must insist that you consult with us.” She looked over Harry’s head, and he turned to see Madam Marchbanks nodding.

Of course she would, Harry thought, frustrated. She makes it sound so reasonable. None of them understand that sometimes my life is a tool like the rest of me, like my freedom or my magic, to be used to do what must be done.

He felt teeth close on his ear, a reminder that his magic, at least, didn’t like being thought of in such a way. Harry hid a grimace, and wondered how he would reconcile using his magic for enjoyment with what the monitoring board wanted him to do.

“Very well,” he said. “I agree to that. If the situation crosses over into the wizarding world and would endanger my life, I will consult you.”

Aurora smiled. “Good. And of course, we must think more carefully about the balance between Light and Dark on the monitoring board—
“

“And the balance of species,” Harry said, as the door opened and Helcas entered, followed by Bone. “And the balance of blood, I would say. Madam, do you have any Muggleborn or halfblood candidates waiting?”

“Several.” Aurora ignored the confusion that stirred in the rest of the room, as her cronies tried to accommodate a centaur and a northern goblin at the table. Harry was amused to see Helcas simply take over a seat that had sat empty between two wizards, while Bone stood behind him and scowled at the walls as if he didn’t like the way they shut him in. “Would you like to meet them?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “I would.”

Aurora gestured a wizard forward who had short brown hair and a permanent squint; Harry thought he probably needed glasses and refused to have them. “This is Marvin Gildgrace,” she said. “His father is Muggle, and his mother a pureblood witch.” She smiled at him. “Tell us why you’d like to be a member of the monitoring board, Marvin.”

“I’ve thought a lot about this,” said Marvin. His voice was abrupt and grated on Harry’s ears, but that, he told himself, wasn’t a good enough reason to dislike someone. “I’ve read about Ministry laws, although I’ve never worked in the Ministry myself. I can tell you when something is illegal, Mr. Pott—that is, vates. And what the consequences are likely to be of breaking the laws.” He blinked hopefully, and leaned forward. “And how to deal with them, of course,” he said in a low voice, with a nod to Helcas and Bone. “And what options they have when dealing with wizards.”

“They’re in the same room we are, Mr. Gildgrace,” said Harry. “Why don’t you speak to them?”

Marvin blinked as though that had never occurred to him, then turned and repeated what he had said to Helcas and Bone. Helcas didn’t

bother to respond, simply looking at his claws as if he thought they needed to be trimmed. Bone stared straight at Marvin and said nothing.

"I don't want to accept him," said Harry. "Prejudices against magical creatures don't make him a good recommendation to me."

"There are few other halfblood candidates," said Aurora, and smiled at him.

"I'm not prejudiced!" Marvin protested at the same time.

Harry sighed, and settled down to the dickering.

It was past midnight when they left the room. Harry stumbled on his way into the Atrium. The lack of sleep was catching up with him, and the lack of food. The cup of tea he'd felt necessary to take while he was with Gerald MacFusty was the only nourishment he'd had for too long a time—he couldn't remember when he'd last eaten, actually, since his stomach had been wound too tight with anxiety to do so this morning—and he wanted to go back to Woodhouse, eat, and rest. Draco's arm around his waist was more than welcome, now.

But they had accomplished what they set out to accomplish. The monitoring board had eleven Light wizards and witches on it, three of them halfblood, one Muggleborn, and only Lisa Addlington one of the parents of the Dozen Who Died. All had sworn the Alliance oaths, all had said they would not interfere in his vates work but would help him with Light pureblood courtesies and Ministry law and the "Light perspective," and all had been approved by all three of them.

Harry was quietly disgusted that Marvin Gildgrace was a sitting member at all, but he had said again and again that he had nothing against any other species, and he was one of the few halfblood candidates, and there was nothing incriminating in his past. Harry had been all but compelled to accept him, especially when Aurora had agreed without pause to let an equal number of Dark wizards have a place on the board. She had even mentioned that she would particularly welcome the additions of Narcissa Malfoy, Hawthorn

Parkinson, and Adalrico Bulstrode, which meant Harry was left, again, uneasily convinced that she was far more clever than he'd thought.

Madam Marchbanks had raised hardly any objections, except to a woman who'd turned out to have been sacked by the Ministry for theft. And she had welcomed Helcas and Bone, as well, of course, as an unnamed southern goblin representative who would not be the hanarz. Because Helcas, Bone, and this goblin were the only candidates of their species who offered themselves, Aurora accepted them as well.

So the monitoring board was mixed, and would help him with matters where Harry feared he might abuse his own power. It was really the best solution he could have hoped for.

"He's asleep on his feet," Draco's voice said quietly, close to his ear. "Do you think, sir—"

"Yes," said Snape, and then picked him up. Harry could only decide that they must be safely out of eyeshot of any of their tentative allies. He would never have made Harry look weak like that in front of them.

"I can walk, sir," he murmured. And he could. He could open his eyes and walk and make political statements. He just preferred not to right now.

"Call me Severus," Snape murmured into his ear. "I did ask that of you. If you can walk, you can do that."

Harry sighed. "Very well. I can walk, Severus." He tried to open his eyes, but someone's hands seemed to be pressing on them and keeping them shut. He yawned.

Snape put him on an expanse of warm muscle that felt like Bone's back. Harry opened his mouth to ask if Bone had actually offered to carry him, and then slid into sleep in a simple, uncomplicated manner. He never felt the Apparition.

"But do you actually think we can keep control of him?" Lisa stood in the room off the Atrium when the others had gone, looking expectantly at Aurora.

Aurora clucked her tongue at her. "Of course we can," she said. "And it's not about keeping control, anyway, Lisa. Do you control a storm? Do you control a dragon? You can bridle them and turn them, perhaps, but not control them. So we teach him to run along a more confined path, instead of making his own by destroying everything and everyone who stands in his way."

Lisa nodded slowly. "And you really think that we'll be able to achieve that, with the way this board is set up?"

Aurora thought of the many times she had nearly seen Snape draw his wand to curse someone during the meeting. She thought of the passion in the eyes of Harry's Malfoy lover—protective passion, of course, but still too mixed with apolitical considerations to be truly effective. She thought of the glances exchanged among many of the board members when Harry had insisted that other magical species be granted a few seats, and that at least some of the Dark candidates be werewolves. She thought of the way Harry had accepted the offers made in good faith as made in good faith, and what she had heard of and seen in the way he interacted with people, gradually relating more and more to them as individuals and less and less as representatives of a particular interest.

A friend would be able to give more and broader advice, on many other topics than the monitoring board had limited itself to.

"I do," said Aurora, and smiled.

Chapter Forty-Three: The Aftermath

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He knew he had fallen asleep—he could remember the feeling of Bone's tendons and muscles shifting beneath him, if he concentrated—but he didn't know what had happened after that. He tried to roll over, and heard a grunt as his elbow connected with soft flesh.

"Watch where you put that, please," Draco said, blinking open his eyes and regarding him with his head tilted to one side.

Harry opened his mouth, and then shut it again when he realized that both he and Draco were naked, his back against Draco's chest, Draco's arms locked around his waist. He had to find something adequate to the moment, but his stomach took over the chore, interrupting with a loud rumble.

"I thought you would be hungry," Draco murmured, making no effort to release the hold he had on Harry's waist. He nodded to the right, and Harry followed the motion to see a tray of food already sitting on the table next to the bed. Draco moved his hand so that he could hold his wand and gesture at the food, and the pancakes and sausage started steaming slightly from warming charms. He'd left the orange juice and slices of apple alone, Harry noted in relief. "Now you don't have to go far. Wingardium Leviosa," he added, and the tray floated towards them.

Harry managed to sit up, although Draco made it more difficult by refusing to let go of him unless Harry actually shifted and made it clear he wanted that to happen. At last they wound up with Harry propped against the pillows, the tray on his knees, and Draco sitting with his arm around Harry's back and his head leaning on his shoulder.

"Don't you want some food?" Harry remembered to ask, just before he speared one of the pancakes with his fork.

"I ate last night, and then again a few hours ago," said Draco evenly. "I wasn't quite as tired."

Harry felt his face turn crimson, but he refused to act embarrassed, even if his skin insisted on giving him away. He cut up his pancakes into chunks, and ate two of them before he asked. "So what happened after we returned?"

"Snape put you to bed," said Draco. "I ate my meal and joined you. Then I woke up a few hours ago, ate my breakfast, and fetched this meal for you." He paused. Harry waited. Draco was arranging matters in his head, he realized, rather than acting impulsively. He wondered if that had come about because of something that had happened yesterday.

"I have heard," Draco said at last, neutrally, "many people wondering what's going to happen now. The rebellion is done, but most of the packs don't have a home to return to."

Harry nodded. "I've thought of that. And I think the best solution for a home for them would be to stay in Woodhouse, at least for now. There's plenty of room for them here, and I can construct wards that will protect them." If my idea about asking the place magic to defend them doesn't work. "As for food and jobs, now that werewolves can have paying jobs and they're no longer fugitives, I was thinking that the Alliance of Sun and Shadow needs people working exclusively for it."

"Really, now." Draco shifted, and Harry winced as his chin dug into his shoulder. Draco murmured an apology and moved to a more comfortable position. Harry took another bite of pancake, wondering why in the world Draco wanted to be this close. "And you think werewolves would be the best choice?"

"They've sworn the oaths, most of them, and I'm going to ask those who didn't to swear them before I give them jobs," said Harry dryly. "And they're the ones who need it most. Others are part of the Alliance, but either have commitments outside it or don't need the jobs, like the goblins. Besides, some of the werewolves are Muggles—" he thought with a pang of Camellia, who had been able to enjoy being a witch for so short a time "—and wouldn't be able to find a job in the wizarding world that easily. I don't want them condemned to the kind of menial labor handed to Squibs so often. So

I'll create a headquarters for the Alliance, and set them to work promoting it. Talking about the oaths to those who are interested, explaining those aspects of pack culture they feel comfortable sharing, giving interviews to the newspapers and writing articles for the Vox Populi, making political links with people who don't want to swear the Alliance oaths yet, that sort of thing."

Draco was silent. Harry finished his pancakes and started in on the apple slices, and still he said nothing.

"What?" Harry asked finally, when he'd swallowed the first few bites of apple. "Don't you think it's a good idea?"

"It's not that," Draco murmured. "I just think that your political enemies will make a bit of a fuss if you only have werewolves working there."

"Do you have any other suggestions?" Harry asked eagerly. "Because I think you're right, but most of the witches and wizards who aren't in the Alliance won't want to work with werewolves anyway, and they are the ones who need this most."

"Then use the witches and wizards who are in the Alliance," Draco suggested. "Some of them are purebloods and don't need to work. And some of them don't have defined tasks, or won't now that the rebellion is ended. What about Ignifer Apollonis? Do you honestly think she would object to working with werewolves?"

Harry shook his head. Ignifer had been a bit uneasy around the packs at first, but she'd relaxed, and she'd even made friends with one of the werewolves who had nearly bled himself dry of magic protecting Peregrine. "How many ordinary wizards and witches do you think should be mixed in among the werewolves?"

"A fair number, at least," said Draco. "You don't want people to avoid the Alliance altogether for fear of being bitten."

"And we also don't want to encourage fear and prejudice," Harry reminded him, and chewed the next apple slice emphatically.

Draco paused, then nodded. "That's true," he murmured. "If we use wizards and witches as the public face of the Alliance, it only looks like we're afraid to admit to the werewolves." He thought again while Harry ate. Then he suggested, "Perhaps a quarter as many wizards and witches as there are werewolves? And I don't mean that has to happen right away, either. Slowly, as more people hear about the Alliance and swear the oaths. It could be just Ignifer and anyone else who really wants to do it in the beginning. Rose Rhangnara might be another good choice."

"Really?" Harry was startled. He hadn't noticed her being friendly with any werewolves in particular.

Draco nodded again. "She's not going to Hogwarts or Beauxbatons, and of course her father wouldn't send her to Durmstrang again even if it was open. She's not of age, but she does spend a lot of time among the packs. I saw her talking to the alpha who calls himself Hawk the other day. Talk to Thomas. I think he'd probably agree because she can learn so much."

He imitated Thomas's voice so well on the last words that Harry had to laugh. Then he choked, because of the bit of fruit caught in his throat, and Draco had to pound his back to get it out.

"Watch out," Draco murmured in his ear. "Of all the embarrassing ways to die, Harry, choking on a piece of apple in your boyfriend's arms! What would the monitoring board say if they heard that?"

Harry started to answer, and then paused, and not only because his throat was burning. Then he said, "What do you think about the monitoring board, Draco?"

"That it's a monstrously bad idea, of course." Draco leaned away from him for the first time, folding his arms and glaring just past Harry. "The way I always did. Whitestag acts as if it won't be that way, but it will. The definitions they imposed on themselves leave a lot of maneuvering room. And I don't like the way they persuaded you to accept Gildgrace."

Harry sighed. "I had to. He was one of only a few halfblood candidates, and he did swear the oaths, and he—well, I think he's prejudiced against goblins and centaurs, but he insists he isn't, and was I really going to say that I trusted my interpretation of his thoughts more than his statement of them? And Helcas and Bone didn't object when I asked them."

"You could have used Legilimency on him," Draco commented, still staring slightly past Harry. "Learned whether he really is prejudiced or not."

"And violated his free will," said Harry, his voice sharpening slightly. "I'm sure he would have said no."

Draco took a deep breath, then shifted forward and clasped Harry's left wrist. Since Harry was about to take his first bite of sausage, and he didn't think Draco would have interrupted his eating without good reason, he stared at him, waiting.

"Harry," Draco said, his voice so soft that Harry nearly lost it in the sound of his own breathing. "You don't need to offer your enemies chances to trample you. You acted as though you really wanted the monitoring board to control you, yesterday. Some of the things you said, some of the compromises you agreed to..." He shook his head. "I don't understand why you did it."

Harry relaxed a bit. He had been afraid Draco was about to confront him with evidence of some massive political mistake he'd made. But he wanted an explanation, and it wasn't one Harry was at all averse to giving him.

"Because I think I have been too reckless," he said. "I don't really expect the monitoring board to be able to help me all the time with situations like a British Red-Gold suddenly appearing. Some decisions I'll have to make fast and on my own. But perhaps they can give me advice in less desperate circumstances, and make me consider nuances I would toss away in my haste, otherwise. Some of them are people with perspectives I'd never hear, otherwise, and some of them are people who've suffered personal losses because of

my hasty decisions. So it might help. And as a price to come back into wizarding society and stop the hunting, it was very small.”

Draco reached out with his free hand and tilted his chin up, meeting him eye to eye. “May I enter your head and see that for myself, Harry?” he asked.

Harry gave a shallow nod, and held his possible panic in tight control as Draco leaped into his mind, not controlling his body but reading his thoughts. It felt like a cold wind, which blew through one ear and out the other. Harry shook his head sharply, shivering.

“You really feel that way,” Draco said. “You do think you need to be more controlled than you have been.” He collapsed back against the pillows as if someone had stolen all the strength from his muscles, staring at Harry.

Harry nodded. “One thing I thought of while riding the dragon was how hard it is to hold my own will in check, Draco,” he said quietly. “Particularly when I think I can do something good. That has resulted in arrogant behavior on my part in the past. I know best, so I do what I think is best, but it’s not always right. I’m not looking at the monitoring board to change my habits of behavior so much as my habits of thought. Maybe next time, I will set up a plan instead of leaping in, and I will learn to think more clearly instead of letting my emotions take over.”

“And my own efforts and Snape’s weren’t good enough for you, then?”

Harry almost shoved the tray off his knees in his haste to put his arms around Draco. Luckily, he did remember to mutter a Levitation Charm so that it could hover beside the bed instead of just dropping off into oblivion. Then he could lean forward and hug him, and Draco could hug back. Harry held him tightly enough that he hoped he could squeeze out the pain he’d heard in Draco’s voice.

“That isn’t it,” he whispered. “You and Snape love me, and in the end, if restraint would hurt me, you tend not to give it. And when I feel bad about hurting you, it’s about hurting you, not because I think what I

did wasn't a good idea. So I need people who don't care that much about me to teach me more impartial habits of thought. That's all, Draco. Really. I have to learn not to ride all over their wills, and I get away with it around you more often. This is about my acknowledging your emotions, not avoiding them."

Slowly, Draco relaxed, and they sat in silence for a few moments longer. Then he said, "And what if you disagree with a decision the monitoring board makes?"

"Then I'll argue with them." Harry sat back, smiling to encourage him. "I do still have a mind and a will of my own, Draco. What I'm asking for help with is restraining the excesses of that mind and that will. I'm looking for someone to argue with, not order me around."

Draco bit his lip as if he would say something about that, but then shoved Harry's shoulder and said, "Finish your breakfast. It's almost noon already. Then you should have a shower and get ready to address your adoring public."

"Almost noon?" For some reason, Harry hadn't gathered that from the angle of light coming through the window. He started to throw back the blankets, and Draco got there and pulled them back up just as efficiently.

"You're not facing them naked and hungry," he informed Harry. Then he tilted his head, and a small smile touched his lips. "Unless, of course, you're not hungry for food," he said. "Then I think they can wait a little while longer, until we're sure that your—stomach is full."

Harry damned his blush and tried his best to match Draco's tone as he replied, "If we made sure of that, it would be evening before I was ready to talk to them."

That made him even more embarrassed, in a way, but it was worth it to see Draco's mouth and eyes widen, and he had the tray that he could pull into his lap to cover his own unfortunate reaction.

Draco lay back on the pillows and listened to the sound of Harry's shower, wishing he could go in and join him. But no, he needed to think about this, and for that, he needed at least a partially clear head.

So. Harry wanted a monitoring board to teach him those things he didn't think he could learn from the people who loved him. And if those things had been only Light pureblood courtesies and the like, then Draco would have understood. It was true that the Light wizards closest to Harry were atypical in how little regard they had for those courtesies. The thought of Tybalt Starrise trying to be dignified and teach Harry the proper way to receive a guest made Draco snort in laughter.

But Harry also wanted someone to restrain him, just in case he trampled on someone else's free will.

Draco rolled his head restlessly on the pillow, then arched his back and stretched. At least it worked a little of the tension out of his muscles, and the last thing he wanted to be when he stood with Harry to address everyone in Woodhouse was tense. He already knew some of the werewolves—the ones transformed by Loki, at least—would object to Harry's plan. He wanted to appear relaxed and coolly dismissive, not as if he were going to hex them on the spot.

When will he understand that just because his will conflicts with someone else's doesn't mean it's a trampling? Or that just because someone's angry with him over something he did doesn't mean they have a good reason?

Draco frowned thoughtfully at the ceiling. What he had seen in Harry's thoughts was a good deal more reasonable than what he had seen a year ago. Harry had healed, had improved, and at least he no longer objected to people wanting to follow him.

What he objected to was commanding them. He wanted to be a leader, because that was inevitable at this point, but by equal argument and debate and discussion and agreement, negotiation and treaty, rather than by ordering people around. The rebellion had bothered him even as he organized it, Draco knew, largely because it involved breaking apart from the Ministry, which had legal authority, and ordering people to do things like protect Woodhouse. There was a reason that the Alliance oaths were so loose; they were designed to

encourage the free will and ability to act of those who swore them, and if someone wanted out of the Alliance, it was a simple thing to announce that and turn away from it.

Harry no longer objected to seeing himself as equal. He still didn't want to see himself as being in control. If he had an impartial authority he could listen to, such as the monitoring board, he thought that wouldn't happen.

Except that Draco didn't believe the monitoring board was impartial, and he didn't believe they would give Harry just advice on restraining himself for the good of everyone else, and he was damn sure that they didn't see Harry as equal to themselves. There were some contexts in which Harry would be under control if he didn't claim control. This was one of them.

He doubted he could make Harry see that, though, at least until the monitoring board badly misstepped. Harry was likely to think that the more he objected to the board, the better a job it was doing; they weren't there to please him, but to advise him. At least he'd objected to Whitestag's attempt to send Draco and Snape out of the room yesterday.

I'm less reluctant to trample on people's free wills than he is. Draco gave the ghost of a smile. So I'll be readier to guard his back, and try political games to limit the monitoring board's power.

Draco already knew what his first tactic would be.

Harry stood patiently, with Draco at his right shoulder and Snape at his left, awaiting the first protest. He had explained his plan to offer shelter in Woodhouse to those werewolves who wanted it, and working for the Alliance of Sun and Shadow as a means to grant them money and independence. Someone would not like it, he thought. He had a private wager going with himself whether that would be George or someone else.

"And what are we supposed to do?"

George. Of course. "That's up to you," Harry said quietly. "I know that some of you have families back in the wizarding world, families you didn't dare go to when the hunting season was still in effect, in case you endangered them or forced them to choose between their safety and yours." A few of those bitten by Loki nodded. "I wouldn't force anyone to remain in Woodhouse, or accept employment from me. It's a choice. So if you do have a family and a home to go to, count yourselves lucky." He looked towards Peregrine and the other alphas whose pack homes had been utterly destroyed by the curses cast at them. "Others do not have as many options."

Peregrine's eyes glittered at him. "We do not, vates," she said. "And I thank you for offering this."

Harry inclined his head, and turned back to George. "I can't win a paying job for you otherwise," he told him. "I can't force someone to hire you. I can't even ask the Ministry to take you back, unless they can find a position for you in some other Department, because the Department you worked for is gone. If something happens and you think that someone refuses to hire you because you're a werewolf, then I can help. But otherwise, if you don't want to accept employment from me, I don't know what you expect me to do." He heard the sharpness of his voice on those last few words and winced, sliding the anger away. When dealing with George, anger didn't help; it just fueled his own rage, and then they would be engaged in a shouting contest, and it wouldn't end well.

"I'm not worried about someone refusing to hire me because I'm a werewolf," said George, though his expression said otherwise. "I'm worried about someone refusing to hire me because I was a fugitive. You didn't give us a choice about remaining in Tullianum or coming with you. Death or becoming an outlaw isn't a choice."

Harry heard Camellia growl, joined a moment later by Trumpetflower and Evergreen. He held up his hand and shook his head, and the growls slowly slid into silence. Harry sighed. This would be something his pack would see as an insult to their alpha.

"I gave you as much of a choice as I could at the time," he said. "Besides, the Ministry has said that all crimes done during the

rebellion are excused. They couldn't refuse to punish the people who hunted you and experimented on you, and then turn around and punish you for running away from that hunting and that experimentation. So if someone does refuse to hire you because you're a fugitive, you also have grounds on which to come to me."

"And if I don't want to depend on you?" George's head rose as if someone had challenged him to see how high in the air his nose could get.

"Then don't," said Harry, his patience very nearly at an end. "I am offering you as many choices, as many paths, as I can. It's not my fault if you refuse to walk those paths."

"Really, George," said a young man who had also suffered Loki's bite, whom Harry didn't know very well. He thought he was only nineteen, though. He frowned at George as though he were a small bug the younger man wanted to crush. "What do you expect him to do? He's offering us jobs and a home if we want it, and you're going to scorn it because those aren't the jobs and the home you want?"

"That's not what I'm saying!" George snarled. "I'm saying that it's thanks to him that we're marked as werewolves and fugitives in the eyes of the wizarding world! And if he thinks anyone will be happy to hire us, he's stupid."

"I can't do anything about it until it actually happens," said Harry evenly. "Insisting that I punish potential employers for what could happen is just as idiotic. Ask me for help if you will. Blame me if you will. But if you refuse to help yourself, then it's your own call what happens to you."

He rolled his eyes and turned away, searching for Thomas. He found him not far from the wall, staring intently at it and writing down notes on a piece of parchment. Harry blinked as he realized what was happening. Thomas was nicking the wall with a knife, and watching as Woodhouse's magic caught the chips of wood before they could fall to the floor and put them back in place.

“Fascinating,” he said, when he saw Harry watching him. “It really takes care of its own, doesn’t it? And it knows intent. It’ll punish the people who are hostile to it, but it just ignores the people who aren’t, and cleans up their mess.”

Harry smiled. “It is fascinating,” he agreed. “And, sir? Is it all right with you if your daughter Rose works with the Alliance of Sun and Shadow to help the werewolves?” He had already asked Rose, and she had verged on ecstatic. Harry thought she was one of those people who had fretted at being unable to do something to personally distinguish herself during the rebellion.

Thomas raised his eyebrows. “In what world would that not be all right with me?”

Harry laughed in spite of himself. “Some of the parents did rather object when their children fought without permission in the Midsummer battle,” he admitted. “So I thought I should ask you.”

Thomas waved a hand idly and turned back to the wall. “She’s perfectly capable of making those decisions on her own,” he said. “Many of those laws—even the one that says wizards come of age at seventeen—come from parents not trusting their children enough, or being too afraid of accidental magic. I did some research into them when I first began looking at the Grand Unified Theory, you know. And accidental magic is much less accidental than they think it is, and much less likely to happen just because a child is angry.” He abruptly looked at Harry. “That reminds me. Jing-Xi has asked to meet you, sometime in the near future.”

“Who?” Harry asked, blinking. He knew the blinking didn’t make him look any more intelligent, but he had no idea whom Thomas’s mind had leaped to.

Thomas smiled. “One of my fellow research wizards,” he said. “From China. A Light Lady. She’s interested in the level of your magic, I think, and how you became so powerful so young.”

Harry swallowed a bit. He had never met another wizard of Lord-level power as anything but an enemy, at least since he was twelve. “I’d—

have no objections to meeting her, of course,” he said, aware his voice was strained. “Did she say when she wanted to speak with me?”

Thomas waved his hand again, his attention focused on the wall. “Sometime,” he said. “Not that soon. Jing-Xi knows that a rebellion is rather time-consuming. At one point, the Chinese government wanted her to do something, and she proved to them they couldn’t force her. It took her about a year.”

Harry nodded, rattled, and stepped away from Thomas. Draco caught his arm in turn.

“Longbottom and Weasley are asking when we’re going back to Hogwarts,” he said softly, and gave Harry something to think about other than a Chinese Lady who was probably going to tell him all the finer points of etiquette between Lords and Ladies that he’d violated. “I think Weasley’s worrying about the reception she’ll have from her family.” Draco was smirking. Harry frowned at him. He knew the Howlers Ginny had received almost daily for a time had amused Draco, but there was a limit.

“Not for a few days,” he said. “I think we have to talk to McGonagall about actually being readmitted as students. The more gestures of good-will we can make, the more people will see that we’re serious about fitting back into the wizarding world.”

“We are?” Draco murmured the words, shifting so that his nose was buried in Harry’s hair. “In a way, it would be so nice if we could stay here, Harry, and act as the political leaders we already are.” His voice was soft, coaxing, and his hand slid up and down Harry’s back in that way Harry found hard to resist. “School will seem so boring after this.”

“Boring I can take, right now,” said Harry. “Normal and quiet are other words for boring.” He moved away from the hand on his back, which was harder than he’d thought it would be. “But I do want to show that we’re going about things legally. We’ll appeal to McGonagall and the board of governors. So we’ll look like good little children.”

“And that’s the image you want to project?” Draco demanded.

Harry snorted. "Not necessarily, but I think it's the one we'll have to project right now. The people who only rely on appearances will be contented, and the ones who know better won't start thinking less of us just because we speak a few contrite words and look appropriately resigned to finishing our education."

Draco snickered and kissed him behind the ear. "Can we wait until after Halloween?" he asked abruptly.

Harry blinked at him. "Why?"

"The third part of our joining ritual is on Halloween," said Draco. "In case you forget." His eyes said that he knew very well that Harry had forgotten.

Harry winced. This hurt more, and in a different way, than the realization that Draco hadn't known Harry loved him for his strength of will. "I did," he said. "I'm sorry, Draco. I don't—" He shook his head and squeezed Draco's hand, unable to say what he wished, or didn't wish.

"After this one, I don't think you'll forget again," Draco murmured into his ear. "After this one, I think you'll be looking forward to them, and demanding to know why they don't arrive faster."

Harry smiled, because he couldn't think of much else to do right then, and stepped gently away from Draco. "I should owl McGonagall, and make sure she knows that we're formally requesting permission to return to Hogwarts," he said. "And then I should speak with Snape, and see if he actually feels like going back to teach, or whether he'd rather remain in Woodhouse until he's healed."

"I think you'll find that he'll want to go wherever you go," Draco said.

Harry gave a rolling shrug of his shoulders. "I wish he could make decisions the way you could," he said. "Considering his own health and wants first, and what responsibilities he owes to anyone else secondarily, if at all. Given how selfish he always thought he was, you'd think it wouldn't be difficult for him."

“Not all of us can be me,” said Draco, “gifted with the ability to think rationally.”

“And pride nothing can make a dent in.”

“You wouldn’t love me if I were any different,” said Draco, and kissed him again, this time with a challenge in his eyes, as much to ask if this would embarrass Harry. Harry was aware of the eyes watching them, at least some of them critical, but he kissed back, and nodded as he pulled away.

“I wouldn’t.”

We have just as much right to do this as anyone else, he told himself again. It’s not my fault if someone underestimates Draco because of this, or thinks I never pay attention to anything but him, and tries a stupid political move. There’s no reason that we should have to confine kissing to our bedroom, or why I should have to pretend that the ring on my hand means nothing.

Harry did not understand, that much was plain. He was frowning as he listened to Snape telling him that he wished to go back to Hogwarts and take up the duties of Potions Master and Head of Slytherin House that Minerva was willing to return to him, rather than stay in Woodhouse.

“But, sir—“

Snape raised his eyebrows.

“Severus,” Harry corrected himself, with a sideways look to ask if Snape was sure he wanted that level of informality. “You’d be able to heal better here. More cleanly, without as many distractions. I know that you’ve grown better able to bear the strains of teaching now, but are you sure that you want to bear them at all? Woodhouse would make your—“

“Harry.”

To his credit, Harry stopped talking and gave him his full attention the moment he heard the sternness in Snape's voice. Snape held his eyes for a long moment without blinking, just to make sure his notice didn't wander.

"Harry. I wish to continue my healing at school, in the midst of teaching and other duties. Joseph says, and I agree, that the isolation of the Sanctuary, or Woodhouse for that matter, would only weaken me. I have enough practice at being strong enough in front of only myself, or myself and a few others. The true test will be acting like a human being in front of other people, including those who have no reason to care about my fits of temper."

Harry looked a bit doubtful, but nodded.

Snape continued to push. "Besides," he said, "if I remained, we would find it hard to continue our bargain with each other, to be a better father and son. Draco would find it difficult to cope with the monitoring board alone. And you would begin living without healing at the same time, I think, since Joseph would be here with me."

Predictably, Harry bristled. "I did promise Draco that I would start looking for a way to break the fourth curse on my wrist," he said. "And using my magic for enjoyment's sake, so that it doesn't desert me."

"And healing from your emotional wounds?"

Harry looked away.

"Harry."

"I'm as healed as I'm going to get, sir," Harry muttered. "The last thing Joseph wanted to speak to me about was—it didn't matter. I've dealt with it."

"And that would be?"

"Kieran's death at Loki's teeth," Harry said, looking back at him, his chin jerking upwards in a little defiant movement, as if daring Snape to ask about this, either. "And I told him the truth—that I turned that

into anger for the rebellion. I've dealt with the emotions of that by transforming them. I don't see why I need to talk about them."

"Regardless," said Snape, "you did make the bargain with me, Harry. And it will be easier for you to keep if Joseph is there."

Harry reluctantly nodded. "It's not that I don't want to keep my promises, sir—"

"I would never know it, from the way you're addressing me."

"Severus," Harry said. "But some of these things are more important than others."

"That we can agree on, at least," Snape said. But not how we rank them. You would push anything to do with yourself to the bottom of the list, if you could.

Harry smiled at him in relief, and then darted out his hand and touched him on the arm, as if a stronger touch would hurt him. "It's not that I don't want to keep my promises," he repeated, a wistful look on his face. "And it's not that I don't want you there. But I saw how you suffered last time, sir—Severus. I don't want to see you suffering like that again. It hurts me too, you know."

"I know," said Snape. "I should know, Harry, from the way it feels when I see you suffer in your turn."

Harry ducked his head. "I should go, Severus," he said. "I need to talk to Woodhouse and convince it to shelter the werewolves—and let me go, since I'm still strongly bonded to it." He paused a moment, as if waiting to see what else Snape would say, and then quietly slipped out the door.

Snape turned back to the potion he'd been brewing, an idle experiment more than anything else, an attempt to change the potion's color from deep purple to pale purple. He had a conversation with Joseph in a few minutes, and he intended to go into it with a will and as clear a mind as possible.

It will be interesting to see how truthful Harry's words really are, when we are back at Hogwarts. The rebellion is done, and there is no immediate crisis on the horizon, only those that will take some time to build. I hardly expect the monitoring board's interference to become obvious overnight.

Harry will have the time and the peace to concentrate on his own healing as well as those building problems. If he avoids that, it will be up to us to show him he is. No more forced healing, however. He is less than a year away from being an adult; it is time we pointed out the path and let him walk it on his own.

Snape blinked as an odd pang struck him in the chest. He had felt something like it before, but not for a long time. After some searching of his memory, and probing at his Occlumency pools, he discovered it again.

It was the restrained trepidation he had felt when he let Harry go to Godric's Hollow for Christmas his third year, the fear that he was making a mistake, but had to let his child make it. Sooner or later, all parents had to let their children walk into danger, and hope it did not damage them too badly.

Has it taken us this long to get back to that point?

Snape stepped back and contemplated the sickly purple color of the potion—not quite what he wanted, but it would do. No. I think not. Then, I suspected he would break, and he did, and Draco and Narcissa and I had to work to put him back together.

Now, we may actually stand a chance of stumbling, and not breaking when we land.

Chapter Forty-Four: Glory Be

Woodhouse did not understand why part of itself would ever want to leave. It preferred to dream and grow, and the current of magic that circled it paced the same path over and over again. With that, it could achieve a depth that the small rushing things would never understand. They thought that life consisted of traveling far and broad and wide. Only Woodhouse knew that life meant deep, knowing itself so well that no small rushing thing could ever fool it.

And now part of itself wanted to go away. Woodhouse sang to the small leafless tree in the dream, and tried to understand why.

The leafless tree's dreams flowed into it, and Woodhouse absorbed them and understood. The tree was not leaving them forever. It would still have a root system that extended back to the valley, and tied it to the hills and the soil. Those roots were more small rushing things who could become small leafless trees, as it had- not entering the dream, but bound to the dream. If Woodhouse would consider them part of itself, then it could still be whole.

Woodhouse was pleased. Other small rushing things would learn to be leafless trees, and then they would not wish to harm the valley, because they would be part of it. The dream would grow deeper, and not split into parts. And if the network of roots extended outside the valley, then Woodhouse's awareness would travel with the leafless tree, and they could always pull back and fold into the valley if they met with any trouble. Woodhouse would learn the far and the wide without ever sacrificing the deep.

It agreed, and went back to dreaming of winter.

Harry blinked and touched a hand to his head as he rose unsteadily to his feet. He hadn't- well, he hadn't expected that to happen, at least. If he understood correctly, Woodhouse now considered the werewolves who would stay here part of itself and would defend them, which was what Harry had wanted, but it would retain a connection to him, too, and consider the werewolves extensions of him, and thus also of itself. And it would keep a bond fastened to his mind, so that he could retreat to the valley whenever he wanted.

Harry looked around the hills and the trees, felt the battering current of place magic as it passed him in its endless rounds, and shook his head. At times he thought the worst mistake British wizards had ever made was letting knowledge of place magic pass away from them.

He turned back to the quadrangle of buildings in the center of the valley, and scratched his forehead. His scar didn't hurt, not exactly, but it tingled all over with a slightly itchy feeling, as if his skin were a little too tight for him. He'd been feeling that all day, since he ate breakfast, and somewhere in the back of his mind even while he communed with Woodhouse and should have been able to feel only the valley. He wondered what it meant.

As he entered the quadrangle of buildings again, the tightness on his forehead grew so bad that his head slewed to the side, like a unicorn's following the guidance of his horn. Harry gasped and stumbled for a moment, wondering if this was some odd side effect from being in close quarters with a karkadann. He had spent the last few days since he'd appealed to McGonagall to return to Hogwarts mostly with other people, but he had soothed her when he could, and ridden her once. He didn't think that her magic should be so sulky that she could summon him away from other things he was supposed to be doing.

"Harry?"

The pulling tightness to his skin vanished. Harry blinked up and realized he was standing in front of Draco, who must have come out a back door of the wooden house. He looked at Harry in puzzlement for a moment. Then his face broke into a smirk, and he nodded.

"What?" Harry demanded, a bit irritated to think that Draco knew what this strange thing was or meant, and hadn't bothered to share it with him.

"You're feeling it now," Draco whispered. "It is Halloween, after all, and this is the third time we've done this. I partially arranged the first ritual, offering you the gift of the ring, and you had to choose the setting of the second." His eyelids dropped, shading his eyes. "And

now, this third time, the magic is arranging things for us. It makes you want to be close to me.”

Harry just stared at him.

Draco laughed a little. “This ritual is old, Harry. And like all old rituals, it’s partially a mold for the magic that comes into it, but it also directs and shapes the people who participate in it. And now it’s directing and molding us. It wants you to touch me, to be close to me.” He shrugged and reached out to put his arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Not that I object. I want the same things, after all, and I don’t have a problem giving in to those impulses.” He bent and kissed Harry firmly on the mouth.

Harry returned the kiss for a moment, then broke away with a gasp. The air between him and Draco seemed stretched as taut as his skin, and the air whined and buzzed in his ears like the words of the vicious bird. He felt as if he might climb out of his skin and up the walls. “Wait- Draco- “

“Yes?” Draco just raised an eyebrow, and didn’t move back from him.

Harry moaned, and winced to hear himself. “Why would it be affecting us this strongly, just now?” he asked. “I thought the ritual proper doesn’t begin until tonight.”

“The Walpurgis ritual began at night,” said Draco patiently. “The ritual on your birthday began during the day. This is the whole day. It began at dawn, properly. And why shouldn’t it? This ritual is called the Breaking of Boundaries, Harry. It would be strange if it let itself be confined on one side of the divide of night or day.”

Harry shivered. Now that he was close to Draco, he could feel the magic humming, contented, in his skin, no longer pulling on him. But he could feel other sensations, too, as if potions were brewing under his flesh, and his cheeks were already darkening with arousal stronger than anything he’d felt before. And he knew it was going to get worse; this was low tide.

Draco's hand rubbed his back. Harry leaned into the touch, closing his eyes, and felt the arousal calm a bit. "I didn't- I didn't know," he whispered into Draco's ear.

"I know," said Draco. "Why do you think I left those books on the ritual for you out, Harry? I wanted you to be warned. And I did tell you, two days ago, that we'd be spending most of this day together."

"I thought that was a ritual requirement, not a magical one." Harry shuddered and bowed his head. He was slipping along the edge of control, and he hated the experience. It had been hard enough for him to let go behind wards, when he knew the emotions from the Occlumency pools must be released. He could not imagine how he was going to get through this. What would happen if the barriers on his magic broke and he hurt someone else?

"If you would stop worrying about others for three seconds and enjoy yourself," Draco murmured into his ear, forcing Harry to hear him over the mad pounding of his heart, "you would know that you can't hurt them, Harry, not today. The ritual is drawing a circle around us. It wants us close together, it wants us focused on each other, and it wants us able to touch and influence only each other. Your magic could hurt me- if it ever would, which I know it won't- but today it can't do so much as raise a bruise on someone else's skin."

Harry frowned at him. "How did you know that I was thinking about that?"

Draco touched his forehead, slightly to the left of his scar, never taking his eyes from Harry's face. "The ritual opens up our minds, too, Harry, and mingles our thoughts. And your thoughts are loud. I wonder how Snape taught you Legilimency, if he could hear you shouting in his head all the time."

His voice was light and teasing, but Harry was beginning to panic again. He imagined the boundaries that could break, and now what struck him was not fear that he would hurt Draco, but fear of what Draco would see.

“Really, Harry.” Draco’s voice was somewhere this side of hurt. “After everything? You really think that I’d see something in your mind or your heart that disgusted me? You’re really ashamed of showing me part of what you are?” He paused, cocking his head to the side. “And did you never think that I might be ashamed of showing off who I am?”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” Harry whispered. “I- Draco, I-” His entire face felt on fire, and not because of the magic. He had never been so embarrassed in his life. There were- there were baser things in him that he hadn’t wanted to share. Everyone had those, didn’t they? But most people didn’t enter a ritual that was going to break down the boundaries and force those secrets to splay like thrown dice over their unsuspecting partner’s mind.

“Harry. Look at me.”

Reluctantly, Harry lifted his eyes and locked them on Draco’s, and to his shock, it was like falling down a tunnel. He could see into his mind, see into his thoughts, grasp them and understand them. The thoughts coiled around him like veins of ore in a tunnel, and he could follow them wherever they led.

There was a dark vein of obsidian that Harry looked into and found was hatred for Connor, simmered and baked deep. Draco still saw little use to the prat. He knew he was important to Harry, and for that reason, if nothing else, he tried to be civil to him, but still, Draco didn’t see a single thing Connor had done so far that couldn’t have been done more admirably and with more strength by someone else. He had been a fighter in the Midsummer battle, but they all had been. He was Harry’s brother, but that was more a source of weakness than use. He had existed to take the Potter inheritance so that Harry wouldn’t have to, but there were ways of changing the inheritance so that it was no longer linked to the Potter name, and then Harry could have had what few solid gifts his parents could have given him. He was just there, and he irritated Draco.

Reeling back from that, Harry banged into another, this one a vein of crystal. That was Draco’s feelings about his father, unexpectedly turned clear and pure by the encounter he’d had with Lucius in the

Ministry when they went there to end the rebellion. He'd seen the way his father's tactics failed against his mother's. He'd seen that just because one had a cool face and cutting words didn't make one into a victor. And he'd decided that what he wanted most was real strength, under the surface. Chill masks had their place; Draco would never deny that. But he hungered most for the strength that made the chill mask a natural part of one's armor.

Harry turned again, and behind him was a glowing strand of emeralds, dark green flecked with gold, the lust Draco felt for him. And if Draco dreamed of fucking, of sex until they were exhausted, of days in bed when they could make love slowly and no one else would expect anything else of them, of a time when Harry would look at him with glassy eyes and begging body and nothing else in the world mattered to him- weren't those his dreams? Wasn't he entitled to dream them?

With an enormous effort, using the training Snape had given him in Legilimency, Harry jumped back and out of Draco's mind. He stood where he was for a moment, eyes locked on Draco's, chest heaving with his breath.

Then he Apparated frantically away, feeling his skin stretch yearningly towards Draco as he did so.

[illegible]

Draco stood blinking in the aftermath of Harry's vanishing, and then shook his head lightly. He didn't have to wonder why Harry had fled, after all. The Breaking of Boundaries had already let him see the answer to that, blazing in his boyfriend's eyes and echoing in his thoughts.

Harry had had the chance to learn what the ritual was about. Draco had left the books for him, and hinted at it sometimes, and waited patiently for Harry to ask questions. And he hadn't. He had ignored the books, other than a few nervous sideways glances. And he'd always found something more interesting to struggle with or ask about when he could have been learning about a ritual vital to his future happiness.

Draco wasn't that surprised, he thought, as he walked leisurely towards the tugging. Harry was probably Apparating into several places around the valley, since the pull on Draco's skin changed direction constantly. He didn't mind. Harry would find out soon enough that he could not leave a certain radius. Even if he wanted to Apparate to the other side of the world, he couldn't do it.

No, he wasn't surprised. He was exasperated.

How many promises had Harry made that he would concentrate on things that affected him personally? How many times had he said that he wasn't afraid of what he and Draco would someday share? How many words had he spoken about wanting to spend time with Draco and think about his healing when the pace of events calmed enough to allow him to do so?

And Draco had waited, been patient even when it seemed as if his body was one low constant ache of arousal and need, and not complained. He had known when he fell in love with Harry that Harry wouldn't be able to return his love immediately, so he couldn't complain. It would be hypocritical if he did. He was only facing the challenges of a situation he had entered with his eyes open.

But he had relied on Harry's willingness to make an equal effort, and work against his training, and get used to being seen, and stop fucking running. And Harry hadn't done it. Oh, he had hidden his impulse not to do it well, because he had so many responsibilities and challenges of his own, but that didn't matter. Face him with the first true test, and he ran.

Draco lengthened his stride, and smiled a little. This wasn't a test that could be run from. The ritual was only the third spoke out of thirteen on a swiftly turning wheel. Their free consent to enter this three-year dance had given the magic the permission it needed to bring them closer together, and the fact that Draco had acted during the first ceremony and Harry had acted during the second one had been another confirmation, if one was needed. So now the Breaking of Boundaries was happening. Draco's hands itched with the need to

touch Harry. His eyes watered, and what would best soothe them would be looking into Harry's eyes and reading his thoughts.

And Harry's boundaries would be falling, including the ones he'd put up to protect himself against those things he wanted and thought were ugly. Draco grinned, and didn't try to stop it. This was the first time, he thought, that Harry would come face to face with his desires, as opposed to lust he could always pretend was focused on Draco.

That was the main reason Draco was giving him a few minutes alone, instead of hurrying directly to his side now that the pull on his skin had settled into a steady tug towards the pine woods. Harry needed this time to face himself. He needed to acknowledge that not only could he want to be the source of Draco's pleasure, but he could want pleasure for its own sake.

And if what Draco had read on the surface of his thoughts was true of the bottom, that was the mildest of the things Harry was close to learning about himself. He had at least acknowledged, a time or two, that what they did in bed felt good.

Give him time, Draco told himself, and halted near one of the hills, leaning his face against the rock. His skin streamed with sweat in the chill air. Yes, I could have told him about this, but more to the point, he could have asked. And I want him to acknowledge that, yes, this isn't just about what the magic wants and what I want. It's about what he wants.

Snape and I can encourage him, but in the end, we can't fight his battles for him. We made that mistake once already, and he told us we were acting like Lily, and he was right. Now, he has to be the one to stop acting like James.

[illegible]

Harry had Apparated to the outer ring of Woodhouse's hills, the place where they sloped down to the grass. He found he couldn't go any further. He could imagine London well in his head, and even Hogwarts, though that was a longer jump than he would have been willing to try under ordinary circumstances.

But he couldn't go there.

He felt as if he were a horse on a great lead rein, plunging in a circle that widened only a few feet now and then, and shrank most of the time. The circle was centered on Draco. His muscles shivered and shook, his skin was so sticky with sweat that Harry felt as if he were about to slide out of his clothes, and when he Apparated back into the pine woods on the eastern side of Woodhouse, he had to fight to keep his mind from being taken over by a vision of Draco.

He landed hard on stones and roots and needles, and lay there gasping, painfully aroused, biting his palm as he struggled to hold in sounds that would betray him worse than his frantic panting did.

He could feel the magic of the ritual, wilder than the patient wearing-down of the air in the Sanctuary, more persistent than the place magic, diving into the depths of his mind and wrenching up memories he didn't want to look at and drilling through barriers he would have preferred to keep in place and forcing acknowledgments out of him he didn't want to make.

You want.

And he did, he wanted, there were times he wanted nothing so much as to wank until he came or throw Draco onto the bed and fuck him, and-

Harry gave a slick shudder of revulsion. He couldn't believe he felt this. It was so selfish. He didn't want to feel it. He wrapped his arm around his face and gasped into it, but that was no good, because the touch of other flesh or even fabric now was making him think things he didn't want to.

He refused to touch himself. He could do that.

Angrily, he twisted through the waves of lust that were attacking him. He knew what it must be. Most sixteen-year-old boys were victims of lust, or of their hormones, or of whatever name they wanted to give it. Harry had always been sturdily proud that he wasn't, that he'd

managed to subdue those rare longings he had and get past them. His training had helped with that. He was grateful to his mother for it, because hormones would have proven a distraction to everything he had to do.

And now the barrier was broken, and they were attacking him.

Harry hadn't wanted it broken. He tried to imprison the emotions behind a wall, but if he could still build a decent one, the ritual's magic ate through it in a few moments. Harry made a harsh sound and shuddered.

Did he need to be ashamed of this? Draco certainly didn't act ashamed of it. But then, Draco wasn't vates, or leader of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. He was important, of course he was, the most important person in Harry's life. But he could make political decisions when he needed to; he wasn't required to make them all the time.

Maybe you aren't, either.

It was the same voice that had accused him of wanting. Harry wasn't sure whose voice it was, his or Draco's or Snape's, but the more he listened, the more it sounded like a prim version of his own.

He wished his bones would stop telling him they would crawl out of his skin if he didn't go to Draco. He had fought stronger magic than this, and kept his sanity intact. He should be able to fight this. He was an adult, he said, he didn't need a guardian, and he should act like one. He set himself to fight.

Then he realized the problem with that. He wasn't fighting an exterior enemy casting Imperio or some other compulsion spell at him. He was fighting himself, his own buried wants and desires and longings that he'd suppressed because he didn't want to feel them. And now he had a voice insisting that those suppressed things were all right, that he didn't have to avoid them.

Harry shook his head in confusion, and then lifted his face in alarm. All around him, the pine trees were blazing. Had he lit them on fire? Since Woodhouse considered him part of itself, and thought that no

part of the valley could attack any other part of the valley, it wouldn't necessarily stop him.

Then he realized this wasn't fire. This was pure magic. Coronas of color extended around the trees, deep purple closest to the trunks, blazing red and green and blue further out. As Harry watched, conjured birds blazed into being from the blue rings, doves colored almost the same as the pines, and wheeled around each other before they scattered across the forest. They took on more solidity as they went, and he doubted they would fade once they got out of range of his magic.

His power was breaking loose. And its first impulse was to create and drape beauty over the trees, not destroy things. Harry blinked and stared at the images for a long time before the flinches in his skin made themselves known again. Then he stared at his hand, and pondered what he'd learned.

I- I didn't destroy Woodhouse because I let my magic fly. I always assumed I would, and then I didn't.

Perhaps that meant that some of the other things he desired weren't as disgusting as he'd believed. And perhaps that meant that if he did break a barrier on occasion, and acted as he wanted instead of as he thought he must, the world wouldn't come to an end.

"Harry."

Harry lifted his head sharply. Draco stood a few feet away, his back against one of the pines, shivering as the light played over his shoulders like warm feathers. Harry could only imagine the self-control it was taking for him not to come closer right now. And then he didn't have to imagine, because looking into Draco's eyes made him know. It was like standing a step away from water when one was dying of thirst.

Harry let out a deep breath. "I chose this," he said, getting to one knee and then managing to stand. He knew his clothes had many small rips in them from rolling around on the stones, and that blood might be trickling over his skin, too. He didn't care. The rush of well-

being that had swallowed him on seeing Draco was already fading, and other urges were making themselves felt just behind it. “And I have been remiss in keeping my promises. If I hadn’t been, then this wouldn’t be striking me so powerfully now.”

Draco nodded. Sweat was already matting his hair to his cheeks and the sides of his face. Harry swayed forward a step, and then forced himself to stop. If he touched Draco now, that would be the end of rational speech, and he didn't want Draco to think he'd been dragged into this unwilling. Draco had to understand.

“I want this,” Harry said clearly. His vision was awash with fire and light and magic and wonder, the barriers in him breaking more rapidly now that he was so close to Draco. “I do. And for once, I’m not going to be afraid of it.”

Finally, finally, he gave in to the magic that was sliding around him and tugging at him like many small impatient hands, and walked forward. He caught Draco's mouth with his own and Vanished his clothing and Draco's.

There were rocks on the ground, roots, dirt, and needles. Harry willed some of them to transform into a cushion, and that ceased to be a problem.

He found it very hard to stop kissing Draco. It felt as if he had never understood before what it was like, to have someone else's tongue in his mouth. And then he realized that he hadn't, because he had never allowed himself to concentrate on his own feelings to that extent. He'd been too preoccupied, waiting for his training to come back, or worrying that he was hurrying or hurting Draco.

“Stop thinking, already,” Draco insisted, tugging his mouth away and then yanking on Harry’s hair with both hands. Harry hissed at the pain, but even that ran along his nerves as if it had new paths to travel for the first time. “Feel, Harry.”

And Harry leaned forward, and did.

SS

Draco knew the difference now. He had thought Harry relaxed and uninhibited when he'd lured him into bed after the release of his emotions from the Occlumency pools, but now he knew Harry had been constraining himself, keeping up a barrier so that his magic would never do anything potentially frightening and Draco had nearly to coax him into orgasm.

Not this time.

Harry rolled him onto the cushion, his magic giving his muscles strength Draco doubted he would have had in any ordinary situation. Draco caught his breath for only a moment before Harry landed on top of him, driving it out again.

And then they were kissing, and who cared about breath?

Draco licked every corner of Harry's mouth he could reach, knowing it was enormously wet, and not caring. Harry's glasses were going to get broken between them- but the moment he thought that, they were gone, safely Vanished. Harry's eyes were open, full of falling green, and staring directly into his, and he'd read Draco's thoughts.

Draco could read his now, too. Harry was being forced to question those opinions he'd relied on for so long that he'd thought of them the same way he thought of objective reality. He no longer thought he was evil for wanting to simply reach out and take control sometimes, not if the person involved was inviting and welcoming the control. And he no longer thought it was selfish or base to want to feel the pleasure he felt when he was in bed with Draco.

He wanted to scoff, he really did, that Harry could ever have thought he was selfish, but Harry was tearing free of his mouth abruptly, and that hurt, both to lose the kiss and to break eye contact, and Draco hissed an obscenity, and Harry hissed something back, practically in Parseltongue, and rolled down his body, ignoring the way his elbows jabbed Draco's stomach in his haste.

Draco was not sure what he expected. He pushed himself up on his elbows just as Harry let his breath ghost over his groin. Draco blinked, and then his head fell back and he moaned loudly.

Harry might not have known what he was doing entirely. Draco wasn't much help. His mouth was shaping words, but they weren't the most articulate words around. He rolled almost off the cushion at one point, but Harry seized his thigh and held him in place. He tried to express his enthusiasm in some way other than the violent pulling on Harry's head and jerking of his hips, but he didn't think he was successful.

Harry chuckled. Draco almost screamed. Merlin, so close already, he wanted to, he wanted to, and he didn't think he had ever cared so much about one thing. Of course, his body had wanted this since he woke up this morning, or, at least, wanted contact with Harry.

He made himself sit up and look down at Harry, reaching out one hand to cup his cheek. Harry glanced up at him, and their eyes met.

Draco looked for a moment straight into pure power, pure exultation and pleasure, swifter than riding on a broom above the Quidditch pitch and wilder than a ride on a karkadann- the first time in his life that Harry had ever forgotten self-restraint and simply taken joy in what he could do.

Draco felt spiral trails of triumph and pleasure rise and dive through him, seeming to originate from the crown of his skull and his stomach, and when they met as a helix in the center of his chest, he shuddered and shook in a way that seemed the fulfillment of all the twitches he'd experienced since waking this morning. Harry was laughing, but Draco didn't much care. He'd never felt anything so good. When he shut his eyes and thus cut off his gaze with Harry, tilting his head back, the pleasure lessened only a little.

Harry pulled back, wiping his mouth when Draco peeked again. He was smiling, still smugly self-content.

Time to test how much he's really changed, Draco thought, and fought past the lassitude in his muscles that wanted him to lie down

be a tease, then he could damn well rub against Harry like a rabid animal and finish what he was starting right here.

But Draco pulled away, shaking his head, his mouth twisting as if he wanted to smirk but was too astonished to do so. "Remind me to ask for this side of you again," he murmured, inching down the bed until his mouth was promisingly close to Harry's groin. "It's not in the same room with cringing and shy."

"Are you going to bloody do this, or not?" Harry demanded, and Draco didn't give him a wounded look for the demand. He only smiled. Harry felt a fear so old he'd barely known it was there any more char and die. He could speak in a sharp tone, be something other than the perfect pureblood who asked for more with a tone of cold courtesy in his voice or the diplomat who expected a refusal, and it was not the end of the world. Draco, in fact, was looking at him as if he wanted to fuck him.

"Of course I'm going to bloody do this," Draco murmured, and then leaned forward.

Harry had wondered what this would feel like.

It was incredibly different. Harry screamed, and then bit the palm of his hand. Draco said something- Harry didn't know what it was, but he found his hand whipped away from his mouth by an invisible tug of magic. He supposed the point was that Draco wanted to hear him, not hear him hold back.

He didn't. He fell into some realm where all that mattered was what he felt. He could sense the heat around him, eating up his skin, and the magic of the ritual inside him, eating through any wall he tried to raise, and the softness of the cushion behind his back, shifting as he rolled from side to side, and the slick trickle of saliva and sweat and wetness-

He came.

Unlike the two other times this had happened, there was no reluctance in him to pour himself out, to enter a moment when the

pleasure was so keen that he couldn't keep track of his body or his magic. Harry knew he made some sound, deep and embarrassing, by the feeling of rawness in his throat when he floated back down, and he knew he was tired and limp and so sated that the relaxation seemed to travel into his bones. And for a moment he had been sure he knew what standing in a British Red-Gold's fire was like.

But it was done, and he couldn't even move. He slitted his eyes when Draco crawled up beside him, and tried to say something, but wound up shaking his head as a yawn strained his jaw.

Draco read it from his eyes, anyway. And for the first time in far too long, his smile was without an edge. This is what he wanted, Harry realized, as they kissed, slowly and lazily this time. To see me completely open to him, not worrying about what would happen tomorrow, or making shagging him just one among many things I needed to do, or thinking of anything but him.

That's what I wanted, Draco's thoughts agreed. Now go to sleep, Harry. You want it.

And Harry did want it, no matter how much he thought he should stay awake, because it was the kind of thing someone honorable would do. He blinked and curled himself into Draco's arms. The heat was flying away from him now, but being against Draco's bare skin brought it back, and the ritual magic remained shining in his chest like a phoenix egg.

Then he did what he wanted, feeling better than he ever had.

Chapter Forty-Five: Readmitted

Harry snuggled closer to Draco. He had been unwilling as well as unable to leave him for long yesterday, and though he knew the ritual had technically ended at midnight, there was no law against wanting to hold his boyfriend in their bed, too. Draco never woke. His breathing was deep and contented, and the biggest movement he made was to press his back to Harry's chest.

He was right, Harry thought, dropping his head so that his hair slid down the back of Draco's neck. After this joining ritual, I can't wait for the next one.

A flutter of wings broke his reverie, and he glanced up over the curve of Draco's shoulder. An owl sat in the window, patiently watching him. Harry frowned a bit. He didn't think the bird was a breed he'd seen before—ash-gray, with gleaming orange eyes. In fact, he saw as he slid gently backward from Draco and stood, it wasn't an owl at all. Someone had sent him a goshawk, and someone had convinced the bird to bear a letter. Harry didn't know what the context might be. From what he had read, goshawks were more likely to bite a wizard's thumb off than carry his messages, and spells made to tame other birds didn't work well on them.

Carefully, he approached the bird, a spell to block a sudden strike at his hand or face on his lips. But she simply stared at him, particularly at his throat, and let him take the letter. Harry stepped back, gaze still roaming her for a threat, and cast several detection spells on the letter before he was satisfied that he held a simple piece of parchment.

When he opened it, he had to squint and use Lumos, and not only because of the darkness in the room. The penmanship was incredibly shaky, as though the letter-writer had done this on the back of a flying horse.

Harry:

If you have received this letter, then you should know that my last hunt is done. The last of those who murdered my mate is dead, and

the path I walk is growing narrower and swifter and steeper. With November's full moon, its end comes, and mine.

Because you have taken my place as alpha of the pack, the invitation I extend to them comes also to you. When the full moon rises in November, my pack will be taken to a forest, where I will be waiting. You may come with them. If you choose to resist the magic, it will not transport you, but I would prefer that you come. I would show you, if I can, why I chose the path that I did.

Loki.

Harry's mouth tightened, and he looked back at the goshawk. She continued to watch his throat—the place where the collar of white light had settled after Loki detailed him to lead the pack, Harry realized. He shook his head slightly.

"Why does he continue to do this?" he whispered. "Doesn't he realize I would hardly be kindly disposed to him after he killed Kieran in front of me?"

The goshawk gave a little preening flap on the windowsill, as much to say that this did not concern her, and then turned and launched herself strongly into the darkness. Harry stared down at the letter again. Behind him, Draco stirred and murmured a sleepy protest at the lack of warmth.

"Harry? Come here."

Harry had to smile at his tone, a combination of sulky whine and true longing. "I'm here, Draco," he said, and floated the letter to the table beside the bed, while he slid in behind his boyfriend and wrapped his arms around him again. Draco flipped over to hold him, and seemingly fell asleep again before he could make another request. Harry rubbed his back and stared at the place where the goshawk had been.

He could have done more good by offering himself up to the British or French authorities and standing trial for his crimes like any ordinary wizard. But I suppose the ritual he chose to invoke might not let him.

Magic like the power that let him pass me and my wards and kill Kieran has a price.

Harry closed his eyes, and tried to distract himself from thoughts of what would happen in November by the warm and willing weight in his arms. Draco murmured into his ear, and that helped, too.

The dream of pine needles and the sharp smell of snow and wolves howling did anything but help.

[illegible]

“And you can’t be convinced otherwise.” Camellia’s face said that she knew it was a lost cause even as she pleaded it, but she made the request anyway, her eyes shining and her throat all worked into one tight lump.

“No. I’m sorry.” Harry leaned forward and squeezed her hand. “Even if I didn’t want to return to Hogwarts, I think I would need to, to show everyone that I’m doing my best to fit back into normal wizarding society. And the pack can’t come with me there. Guarding me the way you would want to would segregate me too much from the average student.”

“But you’re not the average student,” Camellia told him, wrinkling her nose, as if “average” were a dirty word. “I don’t see why you should have to act like one, or why you should have to leave your pack behind you, Wild.”

Harry smiled. He suspected that Camellia was too wound in the ways of the pack to consider any other course reasonable. From what Camellia had told him, there was little point in lying or concealing one's strength in a werewolf pack. The strongest was the one who became alpha. The thought of holding back on magical prowess or intelligence was foreign, as was the idea of pretending to more power than one had; what was the point? And so Camellia saw no reason for Harry to try and soothe other people who might have negative perceptions of him. He should have his pack to walk beside him, and

his snakes to form a solid escort shutting him off from the rest of the school, if that was what he wanted.

"I will come visit you on weekends," he said. "You have my promise of that. Unless you would rather choose another alpha?"

Camellia shook her head. "None of us are discontent, Wild," she said. "If we are, you will be the first to know, and one of us will challenge you. Or simply ask you to appoint another alpha, of course."

"And if I chose someone not strong enough to control the pack?" Harry asked. He thought he knew the answer. He simply wanted to see if he was right.

Camellia shrugged. "Then we'd topple him or her, and the strongest one of us would take over. And the loser would be expected to take his or her place in the pack with no resentment," she added, correctly anticipating Harry's question. "People who resent the place their own talents earn for them are so—so human."

"Even if there was a cure for lycanthropy available, you wouldn't take it, would you?" Harry asked her.

"Of course not." Camellia looked at him with the kindly exasperation Harry had seen the pack use with one of the human guests who broke some unspoken rule, and occasionally for the werewolves transformed by Loki's bite when they resisted the obvious. George received it quite often. "I was bitten when I was less than a year old. I'm twenty now. This is what I am, Wild. I would never give it up." She was quiet for a moment, then added, "Having magic was wonderful. But if I were forced to choose between that and lycanthropy, I would choose to retain my lycanthropy."

Harry nodded. "I understand, Camellia. And I would never force such a choice on you. I'll be honest. I still hope that I can give you magic again someday, but I don't know if it will ever happen."

"I know that." Camellia leaned forward and rubbed her cheek against his. Harry sucked in a shocked breath, then forced himself to hold still. He knew the pack relied on such physical affection as a means of

creating bonds among themselves. If it felt wrong for him to touch anyone other than Draco right now, that wasn't the pack's fault. It was the lingering effects of their joining ritual from yesterday. "If it hadn't been for such a fortunate chance, you would never have had the ability to give me that gift in the first place. I accept it."

She does, Harry thought, after a few moments more of studying her face. That must be part of the pack mentality that she talked about. Accept reality and get used to it. Yes, I wish more people around me thought that way.

"Do you know how long you'll have to spend at the school before you can come back and see us?" Camellia asked, picking up her cup of tea and taking a sip from it as if nothing had happened.

Harry glanced down at the official letter near his hand. McGonagall had signed it, and all the members of the board of governors. They consented to his returning to Hogwarts as a student, but the language was restrained rather than enthusiastic. That was the governors' fault, Harry knew, not the Headmistress's, but it did mean that he would have to act carefully, the focus of many eyes.

"A few weeks, at least," he said. "I want to establish myself as someone not interested in rebellion, and that will mean obeying the rules. Students aren't technically supposed to leave the school at all except for Hogsmeade weekends or holidays—or to go to St. Mungo's if they're too badly hurt for Madam Pomfrey to cure. I don't think that my Apparating to Woodhouse counts under any of those." He tried to smile, but Camellia didn't return the smile.

"It shouldn't need to," she said. "They should bend the rules for you."

"That's one thing we agree on, at least," said Draco, as he entered the room and pulled up a chair behind Harry. Harry Levitated the milk and a cup of tea over to him, performing a warming charm on the tea as it moved. Draco raised an eyebrow and tipped some of the milk into his cup. Then he flung an arm around Harry's shoulder and leaned in for a morning kiss. Harry gave it to him, aware of Camellia watching benevolently. He was just glad that the ritual magic, as Draco had explained to him yesterday, would have kept anyone from

intruding to watch their coupling in the woods. The entire purpose of the Breaking of Boundaries was to lower the barriers of the joining couple, not to make them visible to everyone.

“You’re different,” Draco said, pulling Harry’s attention away from memories of yesterday, for which Harry was duly grateful. “They should put up with that, instead of pretending that you aren’t.”

Harry shook his head, nearly knocking the teacup from Draco’s hands. He leaned back a little so that wouldn’t happen again, and explained, “That’s the problem. I’ve broken so many rules. I’ve acted as though I was already an adult wizard, and an outlaw, and at a times a Lord. They get nervous, because someone sixteen years old shouldn’t have that much freedom and power, in their eyes. What if other children took ideas from it? So I have to show them that I am willing to accept restraints and limits. The monitoring board is a good idea, but it’s only the beginning. I have to show that I’m a student like any other, that I can receive detentions and attend classes and listen to my Head of House.”

“And that’s what I’m saying,” said Draco, as patiently as if Harry had never responded. “They may want you to act like that, but you’re different. And you’re the one who’s going to save them all when Voldemort comes hunting.” If there was any trace of a flinch left in him when he said that name, then Harry could neither hear nor see it. “They should be falling over themselves to kiss your hands and feet, not saying that you can only do such and such a thing.”

Harry rolled his eyes. This wasn’t a part of the joining ritual, or a discussion of vates principles, or a point of etiquette. This was something on which he and Draco were not ever going to agree. When he’d peered into Draco’s mind yesterday, what he’d seen was a young man who had a mindset remarkably similar to a werewolf’s. He thought strength should take precedence. Unlike a member of the pack, he wasn’t above using manipulation to make people think he had more strength than he really did, but someone who couldn’t be ignored shouldn’t be denied, either.

“I want them to demand that I act like an ordinary student and wizard,” Harry said. “I want them not to be awed, and if the way to

reassure them that is to act like a student, like someone younger mentally than I am, then I will.”

“And you’re still so afraid of command?” Draco caught his eyes in a gaze that was not fair, because it carried the knowledge of each other they’d attained during the Breaking of Boundaries out into the open light of day. “If their requests interfere with your conducting the war or being a vates, you’ll still give in and work around them?”

Harry tried to look away, and found that he couldn’t. Draco’s eyes all but compelled an answer, and at least he heard himself saying, “No. I won’t. In those cases, I would break the rules to get what I needed to do done. I’ve done it plenty of times before, after all.”

Draco sat back with a satisfied smile and reached for his tea again. “Good. I think you should remember what you are, Harry. Other people can forget if they want to, but if you do, then I’ll remind you.”

“It might be useful for me to forget sometimes,” Harry pointed out, picking up a slice of bread and biting into it. It would be one of the last meals he ate in Woodhouse, and he tried to stifle the sadness of the thought with rational arguments. “If I can act as I should in front of the monitoring board, for example, then they’re less likely to suspect me of rebellion, and they’ll loosen the restrictions a bit.”

“I have plans for the monitoring board,” said Draco, smiling dreamily into space.

Harry choked on his bread. “Draco,” he said warningly, when he could speak.

Draco cocked his head at him. “Yes?”

Dear Merlin, he was beautiful, the sunlight through the window making his hair and his face gleam with the same level of intensity. Harry found his hand reaching out to touch him, regardless of the half-chewed piece of bread still in it. Draco reached out and caught the stump of his left wrist, his smile becoming something intensely private and self-satisfied. Harry was vaguely aware of Camellia

then they could take care of Harry's little problem together. But this way, Draco could attend to his letters, the one he had received and the one he needed to write.

He took the piece of parchment out of his robe pocket. He'd received it the day before Halloween, and put it aside because he'd known, even if Harry didn't, that he wouldn't be in any shape to do complicated thinking on Halloween. Now he let himself read it one more time, to make absolutely sure that he hadn't misunderstood a single thing the writer said. It was from a young Auror who'd seen Harry and Draco defeat Dumbledore and taken up a loyalty to them, of sorts. Their communication had been interrupted for a long time, first by the Sanctuary and then by Harry's troubles with the Ministry, and Draco hadn't been sure she would respond when he wrote again. But her response had come so fast that Draco wondered if the poor owl had had any time to rest.

Dear Malfoy:

You have nothing to worry about. There are people in the Ministry who are loyal to your partner, even though the Minister could command their nominal faith. The Ritual of Cinnabrus startled us. We think that Minister Scrimgeour still has our best interests at heart, but there is nothing wrong with supporting Harry, especially since he and the Ministry are supposedly allies again.

And the laws you asked me to investigate are indeed the way you remembered them. It was a way for the Ministry to compromise with Lord-level wizards long ago, so that the Lords and Ladies would not be forever fighting the Ministers. Certain loopholes have never been closed, and certain laws on the books were never changed. No one questioned my copying of those books. Auror trainees are supposed to become intimately familiar with them as a part of their training, after all.

Below is a copy of the relevant law about restraining a witch or wizard with Lord-level power when they are working with the Ministry for the good of Britain.

Hugwood's Decree of 1793: Any wizard or witch of Lord-level power, whether Declared Dark, Light, or neither, who does not officially oppose the edicts and decrees of the Ministry of Magic, and acknowledges a rightfully elected Minister of Magic as his or her legal authority, is entitled to be free of supervision in his or her personal life. This applies but is not limited to cases of Auror raids, investigations by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures and other Departments of the Ministry, and questioning by the Unspeakables. Suspicion of a crime must be proven to have some basis before any agent of the Ministry may arrest a Lord or Lady, and then they are to be treated with all due courtesy and respect, and are entitled to an interview with the sitting Minister of Magic as soon as possible.

Thus, your suspicions were correct: in absolute terms, the monitoring board watching Harry is illegal. I suspect they are relying on his age to excuse this, if they even know about Hugwood's Decree, but the law is clear. Age does not enter into it. Any wizard or witch of Lord-level power must be free to act as he or she will, and the moment Harry's rebellion ended and he acknowledged Minister Scrimgeour as his legal authority again, their justification for action against him also ended.

What you do with this knowledge is, of course, up to you. I do not intend to move myself until I know that the monitoring board is causing our vates discomfort, and it may be best to save this weapon until the very last moment, since you could turn the board to your own uses. But I wished to tell you that your memory of the law was not faulty.

Draco smirked and folded his letter, smoothing out the creases carefully and putting it into his pocket. He didn't intend to destroy the monitoring board any time soon. As his friend said, it might be useful, and it kept the parents of the Dozen Who Died content for right now and out of Harry's way. And it occupied Aurora Whitestag, whom Draco thought was the most dangerous of Harry's opponents. But if the interference ever became too much, he wanted the absolute confirmation that the Ministry had had no right to ask this as a compromise of Harry in return for ending the rebellion, and that Harry had violated his own rights in asking for it.

Now he had a letter to write.

It didn't have to be long, and so it wasn't. Draco also wrote it while people wandered in and out of Woodhouse's kitchen, fetching themselves breakfast. He felt glances darted at him. He ignored them. Why shouldn't he be able to? He was a pureblood wizard, and he was doing something perfectly legitimate, and most of the people watching him were halfblood or Mudblood idlers. And if they were his equals, they could never have matched his own confidence and poise.

He finished with the letter and studied it for a moment, then nodded and stood to seek out an owl. He imagined the expression on his father's face when he received it, and had to chuckle.

It let Lucius know that Draco was willing to take up the Malfoy name and legacy again if he agreed in public that his disownment of his son had been a mistake, and promised never to consider such a course again. It had no trace of crawling about it, although, legally and formally correct, Draco had signed his name as 'Draco Black.' It would force his father to bend his pride.

And if he couldn't, then Draco was still secure. He knew Harry had no compunctions against sharing his fortune with Draco and Narcissa; in fact, his mother would stay at Silver-Mirror until Lucius came to his senses. Neither of them was hurting. Both of them knew they had done the right thing.

Time for Lucius to bend his proud neck.

S

Ginny bit her lip and waved her wand at her trunk. "Pack."

Her clothes began jumping into it in neat order. Ginny nodded as she watched the books arrange themselves under her clothes. Everything was folded so crisply she could have cut herself on the creases. Bill

was arriving at Woodhouse to take her to Hogwarts—or perhaps the Burrow first.

And why am I nervous?

Ginny reminded herself sharply that she had done the right thing. She had come to Woodhouse because she thought she could be of use. And she had been. Even if it was only to cook food—Harry ordered plenty of food from the Squib-owned shops, but it usually arrived uncooked—and to use cleaning charms that didn't offend Woodhouse and to stop arguments between werewolves and other people by casting a spell that made people pay attention to her instead. She'd done those things. She'd smoothed over minor problems, and maybe stopped some of them from becoming major problems. She'd done things.

She didn't have anything to fear from her mother, or Ron, or anyone else who might yell at her.

She lifted her head proudly, then shrank the trunk and floated it behind her as she walked out of the house. Harry caught sight of her, and turned at once to offer her his hand. Ginny clasped it, looking into his face, and saw nothing there but honesty and calm and gratitude.

"Thank you for doing this," Harry said quietly. "Even if you don't think you changed the course of the rebellion, the fact that you were willing to do this shows everyone that this rebellion mattered to more people than just werewolves. And I hope that you do retain that courage, Howlers or not."

Ginny found it a lot easier to smile when he said that, though she knew that worse than Howlers awaited her at home. Surely it would be home that Bill took her to first, and not Hogwarts. For one thing, none of the returning students were expected to attend class today, and Ginny knew that her mother would want to see her.

"Thank you," she whispered, and hesitated, and then gave Harry a little bow of the kind that pureblood Light wizards were supposed to use. Her family was that, even though they didn't choose to

emphasize the purity of their blood. Harry bowed back, and then looked up.

“Hullo, Bill,” he said.

Ginny turned to face her eldest brother as he brushed casually through the crowded hallway, nodding to the few goblins there more cordially than he did to most of the humans. His gaze locked on hers, and Ginny braced herself. Bill had never sent a Howler himself, of course—that was more Mum’s way—but he could still give scoldings with the best of them. Ginny had almost broken her arm sneaking a ride on Fred’s broom once, and what he’d said to her hurt more than all the half-hysterical screaming from their mother.

Bill grinned at her.

Ginny blinked, sure that her eyes must have been playing tricks on her, and then Bill gripped her shoulders and gave her a little shake. Ginny blinked again, and then Bill said, “You have everything packed?”

“Yes,” said Ginny, in a bit of daze, and then Bill’s hand was on her shoulder, escorting her away from the crowd. She exchanged a few nods with people she passed, and did pause to say goodbye to Neville, but for the most part Bill kept her moving. And yet he wasn’t angry. In fact, he started whistling as they came to the edge of the valley and the end of the anti-Apparition wards. She didn’t understand.

Unless he’s really looking forward to watching Mum scold me.

“Why are you so happy?” she finally demanded, turning to scowl up at him. “I think that what I did was the right thing. And I’d do it again, if I had to choose. And of course I couldn’t tell Mum and Dad, because you know they would never have let me go. And—“

“I know that, Ginny.” And Bill gave her that grin again. Ginny recognized it; Charlie got it when he won the Gryffindor-Slytherin match in his seventh year, and Fred and George when they came up with a trick that made their father laugh after a long, weary day in the

Ministry of Magic. But she'd never received it before. "I think you did the right thing." He kissed the top of her head.

“You do?” Ginny felt a surge of warmth travel from the top of her head to the bottom of her toes. “You really do?”

“Of course.” Bill caught her hand in a firm shake. “I work with goblins, Ginny. They’re people, some of them better than any wizards, and they deserve as many rights as we have. And then I heard my little sister ran away to join the rebellion and help goblins get rights, even though she had to know that she would get a dozen Howlers. You’re doing the right thing, Ginny, and you went to someone you knew would protect you, not right into the middle of battle.” He winked. “And of course you didn’t get permission. You don’t ask for permission before you follow your conscience. You follow it.”

Ginny knew she was grinning like an idiot, but if idiots grinned when their big brothers approved of them, she didn't mind being one. She took a firm hold on his hand in return, and said, "Does that mean that you're not going to join in Mum's scolding?"

"I'm going to ask her to listen to your side of the story, and support you," said Bill. "Because you listened to your conscience, Ginny, and if Mum wants to keep you from doing that, she can bloody well stop being my mum."

Ginny wondered if her grin lingered in the air behind her when they disappeared.

[illegible]

Remus had a decision to make.

He had contented himself with watching during the rebellion, noting the decisions Harry made and the way he made them, observing the way that he interacted with the pack, listening to the words he used to justify himself to Peregrine and other alphas who had had their

homes destroyed. Now that the rebellion was done with, he had to collect his observations of Harry and put them together.

And what he had learned was this: Harry made a competent alpha for Loki's pack. He still refused the bonds of the packmind, and that meant he ignored currents that Remus himself would have sensed, or Camellia, or anyone else who had spent some time in wolf form.

On the other hand, Remus was not sure that Harry could make a competent alpha for him. He simply had too much of an urge to correct Harry's behavior. He looked at him and saw Lily and James's baby boy, the quiet, bookish child who had hung back and seemed to be a transplanted Ravenclaw at times and a shadow at others. Remus had helped raise him, and he didn't know if he could bow his head and yield to him now.

But what did that mean, especially since Camellia and the other members of Loki's pack were content with Harry?

It meant that he should find a different pack. If the problem was with no one else, Remus thought, it had to be with him.

The words had hurt when he first said them aloud to himself, in the darkness of his own, solitary bedroom a week ago. But he had said them many times since, and the sting lessened each time. And now he had a friendship with one of the other alphas, Hawk, who had lost many of his older members to the strike on his safehouse—they had died protecting the children—and had hinted, in that tentative dancing-around-the-truth way that werewolves had when suggesting to another that he didn't truly belong in his pack, that Remus was welcome in his.

Remus knew almost no one in the pack would miss him. That he could oppose Harry at all indicated that his bonds with them weren't deep. And why should they be? Remus hadn't followed the path that any of the others had. Loki had courted him into his pack, not adopted him. Before that, he had formed a ragtag sort of alliance with Hawthorn, Delilah, and Claudia, but the thing they had most in common was the werewolf who'd bitten them, and Hawthorn hadn't

been truly willing to learn the ways of an accepted werewolf, so that pack was doomed before it began.

No, Camellia and the others would close the hole he might leave and heal without him. Hawk would welcome him, and the young werewolves he led, still feeling their way with each other, would accept Remus more easily than older, established lycanthropes in a hierarchy would.

Maybe he would finally be able to act like the werewolf he wanted to be. And if he wasn't feeling the push to follow Harry's commands while remembering the child he'd been, Remus might have a chance at a more equal relationship with him.

"Remus?"

Startled, Remus turned his head. Harry stood in the doorway of his bedroom, staring at him quizzically.

"My neck started itching," he said. "And I could see your name when I closed my eyes. Camellia said that meant you wanted to speak to me. What about?" His voice was guarded, cool, but not outright hostile, and Remus could not blame him for that. It might be what he deserved.

He wanted to smile sadly, but he held it in. Those measures only took effect with an alpha when he and his subordinate weren't close. They shouldn't happen at all in a properly run pack. And they didn't need to happen with Camellia, or Trumpetflower, or any of the others. That was only one more sign that he didn't belong in Loki's pack any more.

"Yes, I do, Harry," he said, leaning forward. "I wanted you to know that I'm going to a different pack."

Harry blinked. "You are."

Remus nodded. "It's just—too hard, for both of us, if I stay here," he said, staring into Harry's eyes and ignoring the temptation to look down or off to the side. "I'll always remember you and resent having to obey someone part of me thinks of as a child and part of me thinks

of as a pup. And I still haven't thought through everything Lily and James did, or come to terms with my part in it all." He gave a quick shake of his head. "Maybe, if the laws had let me testify at the trial last year, that wouldn't be the case. But it is, and I don't think you need me putting such pressure and strain on the pack. In the meantime, the rest of the pack hardly needs or likes me. I'd rather go somewhere I can do some good, and then approach you with an offer of reconciliation when we're both ready."

Harry studied him in thoughtful silence. Remus wondered what he would say as the pause stretched into minutes. Would he want Remus to remain where he was, so that they could rescue their connection after all?

But Harry held out his hand, nodded, and said, "I understand. I hadn't realized how much of this was still festering inside you, Remus. Go somewhere, and bleed it out, and then contact me again. I'd like to have you as a friend more than as a surrogate godparent or a packmate."

Remus winced a bit at that too-honest assessment, but caught Harry's wrist and looked him firmly in the eye. "Go with the scent of snow in your nostrils and pine needles under your feet, Harry," he said. "And try not to worry too much if that blessing becomes literal. You'll know what to do when the time comes."

“What?”

But Remus had already said too much. He wasn't supposed to betray the secrets of pack customs like that. He never had been a very good werewolf.

Well, it's time I learned how to be a better one, he thought, and nodded a goodbye to Harry, and went to find Hawk.

[illegible]

Finally, there was nothing left to do but go to Hogwarts.

Harry took several deep breaths as he packed the last of his clothes into his trunk. This was the end of the rebellion, and from now on, he could act like a normal student—until the next crisis arose, but as long as he tried to think about what he did before he did it, and listened to the monitoring board, and tried to obey the school rules, then he should be able to avoid the next crisis.

The next moment, he groaned. This is never going to work. I'm doomed to land in the middle of crises all my life.

"Ready, Harry?"

The door had opened to reveal Snape. Harry nodded and shrank his trunk, then looked towards the loo with a frown. "Draco!"

Draco stepped back out, a preoccupied frown on his face. It was a look he'd worn all day. Harry wondered if he were more worried about going back to Hogwarts than he appeared. "Are you all right?" he asked.

A toss of his hair, and Draco was back to his normal self. "Yes," he said, and picked up his own trunk. "I want to say farewell to my mother, of course, but since she wants to say farewell to us, I hardly think that's a problem, is it, sir?" He darted a glance at Snape, who merely shook his head.

Joseph joined them as they made their way towards the kitchen, where the people who wanted to say goodbye awaited them. Harry watched in amusement as Snape's face tightened, but then had to look away as Joseph met his eyes and mouthed something about having a conversation soon. He wondered when the Seer would understand that while he was perfectly happy to talk about things that actually mattered, he'd dealt with Kieran's death, and that was in the past now.

Narcissa was the first to meet them when they entered the kitchen, but she was only the first; there were many more people than Harry had suspected. He felt his face flame, even though so far they were only staring, and Narcissa was stroking Draco's hair back from his

forehead and murmuring something in his ear that was probably much more embarrassing than being stared at.

Draco nodded. "I've thought it through, Mum," he said. "This is what I want to do."

Harry believed he heard Narcissa utter a delicate sigh, but she turned to him then, and Harry had other things to say. "I hope you understand that you're always welcome in Silver-Mirror, Mrs. Malfoy," he said. "For as long as you like."

"Narcissa," she reminded him, and hugged him instead of merely clasping his outstretched hand the way Harry had thought she would. His face now hot enough to hurt, he hugged her carefully back, and she murmured into his ear, "Take care of him, Harry, and let him take care of you. And I'll see you soon, since I have a seat on the monitoring board."

"Yes, Narcissa," Harry said automatically, because he couldn't think of another thing to say, and turned away to face the others.

Hawthorn touched his shoulder with one hand, a soft push more intimate than an embrace. "Take care of yourself, Harry," she said. "And thank you for my life back, and my freedom, without which life is worth nothing."

Harry considered her warily as he reached up to touch her arm in return. Something had changed her from the woman who tore apart her bedding over Claudia's death, but he still couldn't tell what it was. He hoped it would stay constant, though, so that Hawthorn would not yield herself to bitterness and outrage again. "You deserve freedom," he said. "And so much more than that. I wish there had been some way to bring justice to the Aurors who hurt you, but—"

Hawthorn shrugged carelessly. "Sometimes there is not."

That made Harry look at her suspiciously, but Adalrico Bulstrode had come up and asked for his attention, so he had to let it go. And then, after a cordial wish for his continued good health, Adalrico actually said, "At first I longed for bloodshed, to show you why my name was

feared when I walked among the Death Eaters. And then I decided that a war of words is better.”

Harry blinked. “Really, sir?”

“Yes. This way, my enemies are much more likely to underestimate me.” Adalrico chuckled. “Their memories of the time I was feared are nearly twenty years old. If I have to go to battle again, they will think me soft because I did not fight in this rebellion, and I can prove them wrong.”

Harry smiled, though the logic was strange to him, and shook his hand.

Pierre Delacour was waiting behind Adalrico, his hand intertwined with Millicent’s. And next to him was Adrienne, his Veela cousin, and she spoke first, before Pierre could say a word—or perhaps instead of him, Harry didn’t know. “I will carry a good report back to the Veela Council, Harry vates,” she said, eyes fastened to his. “You have what we seek.”

“What is that?” Harry asked. It might be something as simple as “magical power,” for all he knew. The most useful piece of information he possessed about the Veela Council was that their decisions needed to be unanimous, and with several hundred members, it took them years to get anything accomplished.

“You were outraged when you heard about the deaths of werewolves,” said Adrienne. “Most wizards are not. They—” She said something in French, then shook her head. “They say they care about Veela,” she said. “They think they care about Veela. But they care more about humans. We do not blame them. They cannot help it. But you can help it, and you do. You will have werewolves and centaurs and goblins and Veela with you, and they will matter as much to you as humans. Not as much as your mate, perhaps.” She smiled at Draco, then smiled back at Harry. “But you will care if someone puts them in prison, or hurts them. That they are not human does not matter.”

"Of course it doesn't," said Harry blankly, wondering why the Veela Council had needed an observer on him to figure that one out. "I could hardly be vates if I thought differently."

"There are many who have claimed to be vates, or claimed our allegiance, and do not care," said Adrienne placidly. She was the one who took and kissed his hand this time. "Good wishes go with you."

Harry nodded, still surprised, and turned around to say farewell to the werewolves. Some of the alphas had accepted his offer to shelter their packs in Woodhouse and work in a headquarters that would operate out of London, once Harry figured out which of several seemingly abandoned buildings near Diagon Alley actually belonged to the Blacks. Others would return to their safe houses, which could be cleaned up and repaired in some cases, and were formally giving up his protection, though, they hoped, not his friendship.

Harry answered as politely as he could, and worked his way through the packs until he arrived at the northern goblins, who were standing near the back of his room. Helcas had a crooked smile as he watched him. Harry wondered if he had sharpened his teeth into points for a good goblin clan reason, or to frighten the people around him.

"Take this, as a token of our friendship, and to summon our aid if you need it," said Helcas, pressing a chain into his hand. "Swing it, and we will hear your call, as our southern cousins will hear the call of their horn. We could hardly be your only allies without a way to hear you."

Harry knew of no way to refuse the gift gracefully, so he accepted it with a murmur of thanks, and coiled the chain around his wrist. "And you will contact me if you are having trouble with the Goblin Board in the Ministry, I hope?" he asked.

Helcas gave him a superior look. "We are not like wizards, Harry vates," he said. "We can admit when we need help."

Bone nodded when Harry caught his eye. "So can we," he said. "We will follow you back to Hogwarts. And we have an advantage over your other allies, vates. We are close beside you. Should you raise

your flag in rebellion again, you have only to call on us.” He looked wistful for a moment, and Harry realized that the centaurs had had little chance to fight directly, except when they had gone with him to the Ministry to break Hawthorn and the other werewolves out of Tullianum. Harry was torn between sympathy and hoping fervently that he never had the chance to rise in rebellion again. When he started hunting Voldemort, he hoped it would be a private thing, involving only him and those others who had some reason to hate the Dark Lord, rather than a great war that would rip the lives out of innocents.

“Thank you,” he said instead, and went outside. He had one more person to say farewell to, one who wouldn’t fit into the kitchen.

The karkadann trumpeted on seeing him. She stood on the other side of Woodhouse, but that hardly mattered. She sprinted towards him, her feet tearing divots out of the ground as usual, and skidded to a stop in front of him. Harry shivered. To be so suddenly close to such speed and power and heat was daunting. Her head dipped, and her black horn rubbed along his shoulder as she gave a low squeal.

“I know,” Harry whispered, stroking her mane. It fell through his fingers like heavy sand. “I’m sorry. I wish there was something I could do, some way I could take you with me. But you couldn’t live in the Forbidden Forest. The webs would try to bind you, and the other creatures would try to eat you.”

The karkadann snorted, but it was a cheerful sound, instead of the pouting one that Harry had expected. She brushed her horn against him restlessly, and then breathed out, the stink of rotting meat rushing over and bathing his face.

Harry blinked, and then realized he had a vision in his mind, similar to the visions he used to receive when Fawkes sang. The karkadann was sprinting across sand in a place Harry supposed might be North Africa. She bugled, and webs splayed and spun around her as other karkadanns emerged. The one who had come to visit Harry stopped running and began telling them all about the vates. The others stamped their feet as they listened, and then one of them hit another

with his horn, and then the whole gathering exploded into an orgy of violence that was also a dance.

He sighed as the vision faded, and looked at the karkadann sternly. She snorted at him, unrepentant. She was going to do it, and he could hardly control her.

“Try to be good, anyway, and don’t let anyone glimpse you on the way out of England,” Harry muttered, and then watched with his heart in his throat as she kneeled before him for a moment, her horn and her forelegs and her mane sweeping the ground, before she turned and exploded towards the east and the pine forest with a burst of pure power.

“Are we going home now?”

Harry started. It was Argutus, curled up in a pocket of his robe, who had asked the question. Harry smiled and stroked the Omen snake’s head as it looked out of the pocket. Argutus had had little to do while the rebellion continued, except explore Woodhouse, and he had made it clear that he was tired of that. He would be glad to see Hogwarts again.

Hell, I will be, too.

“Yes, we are,” Harry replied, and then turned to find Snape, calming his fears as best he could on the way. For once, he would think about everything working out for the best. The karkadann would get out of England without anyone seeing and shooting her. The Ministry would keep its promises. Those werewolves who didn’t want to stay in Woodhouse would find homes and jobs of their own. His relationship with his pack would survive, and Loki’s strange letter would mean something other than the death it seemed to promise. His bonds with Draco and Snape would grow deeper. Joseph would understand that there were some conversations they didn’t need to have. Hogwarts would a calm place to spend the remainder of his sixth year.

I can dream, can’t I?

Intermission: Discovery Is Your Death

“Severus.”

Snape continued to brew, because he knew who it was. Only three people called him Severus. One was the Dark Lord, and Snape would have sensed his magic coming and knelt long since. One was Regulus, and his voice was well-known and seemed to reach into the forsaken, neglected corners of Snape’s soul—not that he would allow it to remain there.

The third was Lucius, who used his first name without invitation. And this was him now, sounding intolerably self-satisfied as he lounged against the doorway of Snape’s Potions lab in the Riddle house.

“What does our Lord wish, Malfoy?” Snape said at last, when he thought enough time had passed to allow Lucius to seethe, but not enough to show disrespect. He did not want to become entangled in the twisted games that the man played with the other Death Eaters, not now that he had to keep his mind clear for his three most important tasks. He had to spy for Dumbledore, and he had to convince Voldemort he was still loyal, and he had to take care of Regulus, who had very nearly broken from the intense torture that the Dark Lord put him through for his reactions to the fifteen-minute Crucio Snape had endured. Politics had never been less of a concern to him than they were now.

“Why must it be our Lord’s request, Severus?” Lucius’s voice was delicate and shallow, and two years ago, Snape might even have believed that he was truly hurt. But he had become a Death Eater since then. The friendly man who had coaxed him into the Dark Lord’s fold, and taught him how to sense magic as pain, might as well have gone into exile. “Why can it not be mine?”

“You wish little that I can provide, Malfoy,” Snape said calmly, watching as the potion came to a boil. He cast the last handful of comfrey he held into it, and the liquid hissed like Nagini. Then it calmed, the ripples spreading out with unnatural speed from the center of it. Snape lifted his wand and cast a stabilizing spell on the potion, then nodded. Ten minutes of cooling, and he could take it to

Regulus. It would soothe the jerking motions in his limbs, very nearly bordering on convulsions.

A light step was all the warning he had before Lucius's wand was pressed against the back of his neck. Snape stared straight ahead and cursed himself. Yes, when brewing, he had the tendency to fall into a trance state and only consider the potion in front of him, not the man behind him, but it was a weakness he usually remembered and compensated for. And he should have done so now. Snape was far more angry at himself than he was at Lucius. Lucius was simply being himself. He would be obsessed with power plays and precedence until the day he died.

"You will not ignore me when I am speaking to you," Lucius whispered.

"No," Snape agreed, not letting his cold mask slip from either face or voice. If this potion cooled for more than ten minutes, then he would have to make it again, and Regulus would suffer more hours of pain—only minutes to those who did not hurt as he did, but endless while one endured them. Snape knew that well, even if it had usually been mental knives that laid him flat and not physical ones. Sometimes he thought he could feel the blades stuck through his head if he turned his neck just right. Some James Potter and his friends had put there, some Eileen Prince, and some Tobias.

What Lucius had never done was put one there. And he would have the chance if this took more than ten minutes, and Snape had to brew again. So he would make sure that it did not take that length of time.

"What do you wish, Lucius?" he asked, and took care to make his voice appropriately humble.

On the verge of getting what he apparently wanted, Lucius grew coy. Of course, he was probably able to sense that time was important to Snape, and therefore he didn't want to hurry. He twirled the wand against the back of his neck. Snape counted heartbeats and translated them into minutes. Three had already gone by.

“I know where you go,” Lucius said at last, in a murmur so soft that Greyback could have been lurking outside the room and he would not have heard, “when you go off by yourself.”

Those solitary journeys were Snape’s trips to report to Dumbledore. He did not dare use an owl, nor slip off on his own too often. He was necessary to the Dark Lord’s success as his Potions brewer, and now he had to care for Regulus as well. He had to go under the cover of his missions.

And if Lucius knew what they meant—

But he did not, Snape was certain. He would have gone to Voldemort if he had. Lucius had tied his life to Voldemort with that Dark Mark on his pale, pretty arm. He could not afford the loss of this war.

Unless he really does want something out of me more than he wants to see our Lord win against the old fool.

But no, Snape would not think that. He would think that Lucius was running a very long bluff. And if he was, then Snape would bring his own greatest weapon into play. It was not one he had thought to use so soon, just a few months after he created it, but if it was required, then it was required.

“You do not know, Lucius,” he said calmly.

“And why not?” Lucius’s voice surged with eagerness, no doubt hoping that Snape would tell him what he hadn’t been able to find out himself through sheer carelessness.

Unless he knows already.

Snape told himself sternly that Lucius did not know, and that he was to stop thinking of that, now. The emotions and the thoughts dropped back beneath the Occlumency pools, and he could breathe more freely, now. He even managed a smile, and a slight chuckle, just this side of what would probably push Lucius to curse him.

“Tell me.” The wand poked him hard enough to rock his head forward.

Seven minutes. He had three left. And really, Snape hated being pressured to act like this, and he disliked revealing his greatest weapon so early, and he was only confirming to Lucius that there was indeed something important about the way he slipped off by himself, which wasn't what he had wanted to do. But sometimes, one made a sacrifice one hadn't wanted to keep playing.

He thought a nonverbal spell, using wandless magic; he was certainly angry enough to do so. And a tiny charmed vial floated out of his robe pocket. Lucius shifted his head to stare at it.

To his credit, he recognized the liquid inside the vial at once. Why not? It was a potion that Voldemort had ordered him to make and use on a prisoner a month before, insisting that Lucius brew it again and again until he got it right.

For a long moment, there was nothing behind Snape, not even breath. And then Lucius took the wand away from his neck. Snape turned to see him bowing. His face was full of hatred, but mingled with the hatred was respect, and a calculation that Snape recognized and even trusted. Lucius would not stop hunting him, trying to repay him for this humiliation, but he did understand, now, what lengths Snape might go to to defend himself, and so he would not try something this stupidly obvious again, either.

“My apologies, Severus,” he said. “I had no idea you were so busy.” He gave him a shallow nod, and then turned and walked away.

Snape floated the charmed vial back into his robe pocket, scooped up a cup, dipped up the cooling potion on the ten-minute mark, and then bore it to Regulus.

[illegible]

Regulus was half-delirious from the pain, even after Snape had made him sip the potion and then eased him back onto his pallet. That was

the only reason he was saying such ridiculous things, or had such a ridiculously tight grip on his hand now.

“You’re a good friend, Severus,” he murmured, his eyes sliding relentlessly shut. The potion induced sleep after it soothed the pain. “Such a good friend.”

“I am not.” Snape sat still, the cup in one hand, and monitored the flutter of Regulus’s pulse in his throat, making no attempt to return the grip. Though it was rare, ingestion of this potion sometimes caused the drinker’s heartbeat to speed up beyond what was comfortable. And what would he do if someone came by and saw him clutching Regulus’s hand and mistook it for weakness? He could not afford it, not now that he was a spy. Discovery of any kind was his death. “Your brother insured that I would never feel any friendship for a Black.”

Regulus laughed, and forced his eyes open. Snape tossed him a cool look. “What have I told you about fighting the potion’s effects?” he demanded.

“You—you’re so much better than the rest of them,” Regulus muttered, and his glance was fond. “And sometimes you act as though you thought you were exactly the same. You can’t see it, can you, Severus? I thought you knew, and were guarding the treasure inside you from contamination against the darkness. And now I realize that you don’t even see it. You do think you’re the same as the rest of them.”

“You are babbling,” Snape told him flatly.

“No, I’m only speaking the truth, something I can’t do now,” said Regulus, and his grin was half-crazed. “You have the strength to survive where none of them do. You have the courage that’s going to bear you out of here. The rest of us might die, but you’ll flutter free like—like some moth. No, like some phoenix.”

“And now you’re raving,” Snape said, frowning. The potion’s effects sometimes relaxed the boundaries of the brain, but not by this much. He peered again at Regulus’s pulse.

"I'm not," Regulus insisted. "You're more than just a Death Eater, more than just Voldemort's servant."

Snape didn't look at him warily, because someone was watching. Someone was always watching. The Dark Lord depended on all his Death Eaters to watch one another. "Of course I am," he murmured. "I am his most trusted servant." He eased Regulus's faltering hand from his and back down onto the pallet.

"A phoenix," Regulus muttered, closing his eyes, finally. "Strong enough not just to survive, but to live."

Snape shook his head and kept on watching as his restlessness smoothed into sleep. While he did, he thought of the vial in his robe pocket, the glittering, transparent green liquid with a lock of fragile blond hair floating in it.

Lucius had come to them exulting a short time ago, delighted by the birth of his son. It had been the first honest emotion Snape thought he had ever seen on his face. And as he celebrated and conjured wine for those Death Eaters in the Riddle House, Snape had seen a strand of hair clinging to his robe, and had charmed it free with a simple motion of his hand.

This potion, graced with a strand of the victim's hair, would make them die choking on their own blood. And it worked from a distance, and the younger the victim, the better.

Snape doubted that Lucius would try anything against him while Snape essentially had a knife laid against the throat of the vulnerable Draco sleeping on Narcissa's breast. But it would have been pleasant to keep the weapon safe and secret for a while. As it was, Snape knew he would have to watch his back. Lucius would kill him if he could.

Perhaps it would be best, after all, Snape thought, as he gazed at Regulus's sleeping face, if I let him know about the second strand of hair, the one I do not carry on me at all times.

You are wrong, Regulus. I am no phoenix. Or I am, at best, one that burns with a black flame.

Interlude: The Liberator's Sixth Letter

November 3rd, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I am sorry that I haven't been able to communicate with you more often, sir. The worst happened. Soon after I sent my last letter, my father did find out that I had communicated with someone else without his permission, though he did not find your name.

I suffered. But it is a means of suffering I am used to, and endure, my eyes looking towards the day when all can be free.

My father released me from the coffin he chose for me when it became obvious that things had changed in such a way as to favor the cause of the Light. The first thing he did when I was conscious again was to tell me about the bargain that the Light pureblood families had made with Harry vates. I asked as many questions about this bargain as I dared, and it seems genuine. At least, it is genuine on Harry's part.

The Light wizards like my parents, who have always regretted the fall and loss of Albus Dumbledore, will try to secure more out of it than they should rightfully have. I tell you this as a friend, Minister. My father has made no solid plans as yet, but he has not gained as much as he feels he should have in the last few months, and that always irritates him. He is a regular Lucius Malfoy for scheming and planning—but he considers himself different, of course, because of the allegiance he Declared for. I wish that he might look into the Mirror of Erised or another legendary glass at some point, and see his own ambitions writ there in easily recognizable prose. That might reconcile him to the notion that Dark and Light are not as different as he thinks, at least when he is the exemplar of Light in the comparison.

The mirror that my parents used to make contact with, or spy on, Falco Parkinson is gone. I am sorry, Minister. I can only surmise that they grew nervous having it in their possession, and passed it on to another member of the Order of the Phoenix.

The more I listen and look, the more convinced I am that Falco Parkinson never actually made contact with my parents, or any other members of the Order. They wouldn't be so quick to abandon him and focus their attention on this bargain with Harry vates if that were the case. That does not mean he isn't dangerous, but you may have to worry less about his fanatical followers and more about him.

Keep as close an eye as you can on Harry and his monitoring board, Minister. And look close to your own allies, as well. One may harbor a serpent in the breast without even realizing it.

May the shadows shelter you.

Yours,

The Liberator.

Chapter Forty-Six: I Am No Lord

Connor hugged him on his way into breakfast a few days later, and Harry turned and looked at him in puzzlement. Connor blinked back at him for a moment, then laughed and hugged him again. "I can't be glad about my brother being back?" he muttered into Harry's neck.

"I—of course you can," said Harry, and gave him a one-armed hug. His hand was clutching his response to Loki, which he'd intended to send from the Owlery after he ate. "But you've hugged me every day now."

"I missed you," said Connor simply, shrugging, and hugged him again. Harry could feel Draco's stare on the back of his neck. He ignored it. It was one thing for Draco to dislike Connor for what he'd done in the past, and another for him to be jealous of his touching Harry.

"Where's Parvati?" Harry felt free to ask, when Connor pulled back. He had held back on the question as long as he could, but he was wondering if the amount of time he'd spent around Connor in the past few days was responsible for driving his brother's girlfriend away.

Connor glanced at the floor.

Harry made a soft concerned noise, and let the letter hover in the air beside him as he grasped Connor's chin and tilted it back up. "Well?" he asked, the moment they were eye to eye and he doubted that Connor could hide anything important from him.

"She—said that she needed to think about things, and I needed to think about things, too," said Connor, with a small shrug of his shoulders. "I still like her, but we disagreed too much. She was afraid that you would come back to the school so proud of what you'd achieved that you wouldn't hesitate to use your magic on other people." He peered at Harry from beneath his fringe. "And I told her that wasn't true, and then when she saw it wasn't, she turned away from me. I think she doesn't like being proved wrong."

"And that only became apparent to you now?" Draco sneered from behind Harry.

Harry gave him a swift reprimanding glance, and turned to his brother. "I'm sorry, Connor. If you think it would help, I'll talk to her myself, and try to explain that I have no interest in using my magic against others."

Connor shook his head. "She barely took it well from me, Harry. She'd scream at you, and then feel embarrassed about it later."

"All right." Harry was the one to hug Connor this time, and to watch with pitying eyes as he went to the Gryffindor table. Then he took up Loki's letter again and accompanied Draco to the Slytherin table.

Heads turned as they walked across the Great Hall. Of course they did, Harry thought, and strove his best to stay calm. They had only been back at Hogwarts for three days. That wasn't long enough for most of the students to start thinking of them as Housemates and not rebels. And if some of the students followed the articles in the Daily Prophet that declared Harry had done a great service for the wizarding world by ending the rebellion, and others followed the articles in the Vox Populi that claimed Harry had made a cynical political bargain with the Light wizards in return for increased power among his favored magical creatures—could Harry blame them for that? Yes, in some ways, both of those were true.

"I wish they would stop staring," Draco said viciously as they sat down and accepted the cornflakes and pumpkin juice from Millicent.

Harry looked at him in surprise. He couldn't remember the last time Draco had complained about attention, positive or negative. "Why? Don't you enjoy being looked at?" He added a teasing tone to his voice, and grew even more surprised when Draco shook his head at him.

"What do you have to do to make them see that you're not going to use your magic against people?" Draco muttered, and then sank into brooding.

Harry shrugged. "Some of them won't believe it no matter what I do or say," he said, and poured milk across his cornflakes. "I try not to let it

Draco had found an opponent, one he respected, but that didn't mean he wasn't incredibly frustrated.

The frustration only increased when he watched the Patil bitch and other students who should have known better shying from Harry. He hadn't flattened the Ministry with his magic, or come back to the school and demanded concessions from the Headmistress. Ironically, Draco thought, it might have been easier for them to understand if he had. Lords had a long history of acting that way, whether Light or Dark. The only thing that varied was what they demanded.

But Harry didn't ask for anything, and so now most of them were convinced he was playing some sort of long-running game, and that the werewolves were merely the first of the magical creatures to receive equal rights. From the murmuring Draco had heard, house elves were next.

He glanced at Harry, eating his cornflakes with a placid expression, and as placidly convinced that everything would work out. He shook his head. That wasn't to say that Harry was unconcerned by what happened around him, or unresponsive to threats. But he didn't tend to respond to the threats until they became threats. He was all about curing ills, and not preventing them.

He could have used the devotion he had garnered from the saner sections of the British wizarding public to ask for anything he wanted. He could have at least asked for small things from his Housemates, such as being made Seeker on the Slytherin Quidditch team again. Instead, he had told Draco that the new Seeker they'd chosen, a fourth-year named Sam, flew better than he would right now, having practiced as Harry hadn't had a chance to do in the last few months.

He accepted so much of what happened to him.

It drove Draco mad.

His attention was distracted when he saw an immense bird flying through the window of the Great Hall, heading straight for him. Even among the maze of owls dropping the Daily Prophet and the Vox Populi and letters on the House tables, it stood out; it was a great

horned owl, and those weren't used for ordinary message delivery. Draco's heart beat all the harder when he recognized the owl as Julius, kept solely for Lucius Malfoy's most important post.

Julius landed in front of him, scattering Draco's plate and bowl as if neither existed, and fixed him with a condemning yellow eye that didn't make Draco hold out much hope for the contents of the letter. Draco took the envelope carefully, and still didn't quite manage to evade the large beak that nipped at him, gashing open one of his fingers to the bone. He was grateful for his father's training in schooling one's emotions in public then; his face remained cool even as blood poured down on the tablecloth, and even as Harry exclaimed and cast a healing spell at him.

"What does he want?" Harry asked, casting a flat look at Julius. Draco remembered the owl cutting open Harry's own wrist and arm, but he had accepted the pain. It seemed it was different when Draco was the one hurt, and he felt a ridiculous stir of warmth at that even as he tried to open the letter without getting blood on it.

"For me to read this and respond, I would wager," Draco murmured.

The letter was simple, and had been written in gold ink. Draco searched his mind for the significance of that for only a moment before he remembered. Malfoys used gold ink to address traitorous spouses and rebellious children.

November 4th, 1996

Dear Draco Black:

In no way do I accept the 'compromise' that you appear to be offering. What promises I make, I keep.

There will be no public apology unless it comes from your own mouth. You will meet me in private, and I will explain how matters stand to you. What lies between your mother and me is our own affair, and I will have a different meeting with her. But for now, you will come to the Manor on this Saturday, and explain your side of the story. I will

listen without interrupting, and then I will tell you mine. I am confident that you will see sense.

You will not abandon all you have become, all I have trained you to be, simply because you wish to bed a halfblood.

Lucius Malfoy.

"I received a letter from him, too," said Harry.

Draco looked up. Harry was holding a piece of parchment flat in his own hand as if he didn't want to touch the writing, and he gave Draco a small, hard smile.

"This is his formal resignation from the Alliance of Sun and Shadow," said Harry.

My father has gone mad.

Draco didn't think that was literally true, but he was sure that Lucius's pride and stubbornness were preventing him from making some very simple gestures of submission and apology. And now he wanted what he had always had, including a place in Harry's good graces and admiration in his son's eyes, without bending one inch of that stiff neck.

"How far can he actually travel from you?" he asked Harry. "He's in a truce with you, after all, and you gave him the gift of Parseltongue as he gave you the gift of passing the Manor's wards."

"He can go as far as he wants," said Harry, his eyes almost unearthly, "as long as he doesn't hurt me, one of my allies, or someone else." He nodded to the letter in Draco's hand. "If that had contained an actual physical threat to you, I could call him on violating the truce-dance. As it is, he's approaching you in the context of disowning a family member, and I can't interfere with a pureblood family, unless they actually ask me to." His lips twisted. "I wonder if that was one reason he was very careful to truce-dance with me as an individual, and not commit himself to me more than access to the Manor implies. He wanted to be sure that I wouldn't be seen as part of the family,

that I wouldn't have the authority to ask him what the fuck he thinks he's doing by disowning his only son and magical heir."

"I'm not exactly his magical heir," Draco murmured, his mind racing. "I'm the Malfoy family's magical heir. He can't take that away from me. But only certain legacies come down to the bloodline to the magical heir. Blood heirs and legal heirs receive different things, and he might choose someone else as legal heir, simply to make me angry."

"Draco."

He recognized the tone in Harry's voice from long experience, and he shook his head without even looking at him. "He isn't going to cause a change in the joining ritual, Harry, or what we have between us," he said, turning his hand so that it clasped Harry's wrist. "I made my choice when I followed you. He can't do anything to foul that up. He can accede to what my mother and I want, or he can live the rest of his life in loneliness and isolation."

And he would probably do it, too. Draco remembered an argument his mother and father had had when he was five that had endured nine months, and at last resulted in Narcissa giving in, because she had not cared as much about the initial insult as Lucius in the first place. The only matters on which she tended to defy Lucius periodically were matters related to him, Draco thought.

Well, that was his mother. But he did not intend to give in this time. It was time for Lucius to realize that his son was not Narcissa, and neither was he a mindless pawn, and he cared about this argument very, very much.

"No response," he told Julius.

The owl flapped his wings and hissed at him in agitation. This close, Draco could see every shining curve of that scything beak, and could well imagine what it would do to his face, if Julius bit his cheek the way he had bitten his finger. He didn't care. He forced himself to stare into those unblinking yellow eyes, not blinking himself, and at last the great horned owl was the one to turn and flap away, wheeling the

length of the Great Hall before he launched himself through the window.

Draco sat where he was, breathing steadily for a few moments, warmed by the firm grip of Harry's hand on his. Then he shook his head, retrieved his breakfast dishes, and went back to eating.

He resolved to put Lucius Malfoy and all matters connected to him out of his mind for right now. His refusal and his demands were both simple. The political problems surrounding Harry were more complex and required more of his attention.

[illegible]

Lucius stood when he noticed Julius wheeling towards the Manor; wards attuned to the owl gave his master eyes to see where he flew, as soon as he came within a certain range. But Julius went to his owlery without once glancing at a window, and left Lucius to stand there in heart-thundering silence for a long moment.

At last what must have happened occurred to him, but he did not wish to accept it.

His son had betrayed him, for a halfblood lover, a last name tainted by madness, and a wife who had also refused to return, though Narcissa had at least done him the courtesy of sending a note. Draco could not have been blunter had he shown up for the meeting after all, offered Lucius a Fuck you, and then walked out again.

Lucius was tempted, for just a moment, to sit down and put his hands over his face, or to give in to some other childish and dangerous impulse like smashing one of the priceless treasures sitting on the shelves of the study. But he stifled the impulse at once. His father had told him the truth when he said that if one let one's private behavior become less than impeccable, sooner or later one would slip in public.

Instead, Lucius took several deep breaths and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he knew they were as clear and calm as a

lake in winter. More to the point, his mind was detached and drifting, and he could consider the matters that pressed in on him carefully, clinically, instead of as problems that would eat him alive if he waited.

He had suffered several setbacks of late. It had become obvious to him that the Unspeakables had betrayed him early on, when he made his once-a-month check for impositions in his mind, and discovered a section of Obliviated memories he could not crack open. Add to that that he had not received his promised reward for the distraction he had given them—a werewolf served to them on a platter, and they could not keep Harry’s attention away from politics?—and he was no longer inclined to trust them. So he had become part of the Ritual of Cincinnatus, and he still expected to reap the rewards from that.

And then he had disowned Draco to teach him a lesson, and the boy was too much of a boy to bow his head and make an apology like a man. Lucius would have arranged things carefully for the private meeting, if Draco had agreed to come to it, and that would have ended the matter and repaired the crack in the Malfoy family's façade that currently gaped open for all to see.

But there was another course he could take. Lucius grimaced. He did not like this course, not least because it would taste like ashes in his mouth.

And it was the only way that he could get close enough to Draco and Harry again to regain their trust, and arrange matters to his satisfaction. Narcissa was a different matter. That she had bothered to send a response meant Lucius could deal with her on another plane.

But the boys...

Lucius shook his head delicately, in sadness for the impetuosity of youth, and went to put matters in motion.

[illegible]

“Potter.”

Harry continued walking out of Defense Against the Dark Arts, even when the footsteps behind him, and the insistent call of the word, made it obvious that someone was talking to him. He turned in the moment before a hand would have grasped his shoulder. He decided that he wasn't very surprised to find that he faced Terry Boot, a Ravenclaw.

“That's not my name anymore,” he said distantly, and Terry's face flushed. But he took a few deep breaths and managed to calm down. Harry could see Draco coming up behind, and practically feel Syrinx, Owen, and Michael starting to converge. Apparently their lightning bolt scars hurt if he was feeling irritated enough, which made Harry wish he had never allowed them to swear those oaths or cut their arms.

“I know it isn't,” said Terry. “But I didn't want to address you with your first name, and any other sounds like a title.”

Harry watched him with a little more interest. At least he was intelligent enough to realize how often people used vates as if it were a substitute for “Lord.” And intelligent enough to despise it, too. “You have my attention that you wanted so desperately,” he said. “What is it, Boot?”

“Everyone else is talking about what you meant with the monitoring board and your other political moves,” said Terry. His eyes traveled over Harry's head, and Harry guessed that one or more of his sworn companions had arrived. “But no one seems to have asked you directly. So I will. What are you going to do?”

Harry felt a reluctant smile tug at the corners of his mouth. “What I said I would,” he said. “Meet with the monitoring board on occasion. Work with the Light wizards to make sure they regain some of the political prominence they lost through the accusations against Dumbledore. Protect the rights of werewolves and other magical creatures, including guiding some of the members of the Centaur Committee into the Forbidden Forest.” They had contacted him over the weekend and practically begged Harry to help them find the

centaurs—and probably make sure that the centaurs didn't eat them, though the letter hadn't actually said that. "Ask more people to swear the Alliance oaths. Speaking of that, do you want to?"

Terry shook his head. "I like to understand someone I'm going to give my political allegiance to first," he said. "And I still don't understand you, Pott—Harry." He grimaced as if he found the name hard to speak. Harry was privately delighted. These were the people he had hoped to reassure by taking on the monitoring board, those not fully committed who would now feel free to speak instead of simply cowering away from him. That he could hear Draco growling about it was irrelevant. "What do you gain from this?"

"Rights for werewolves," said Harry. "And more people swearing to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. And more trust from those Light wizards who seem to have forgotten about fighting Voldemort and decided to fight me, instead."

There was no flinch at Voldemort's name, and Harry's estimate of Terry rose another few notches, especially when the Ravenclaw boy just went on studying his face. "And you have no interest in Declaring?" he asked slowly, after a few minutes.

Harry shook his head fiercely. "None. I never will. Just as I have no plans to take a last name right now just to make it easier for people," he said, and Terry's smile seemed against his will. "I'm not a Lord. I'll say that as many times as I need to make people aware of it, to make people accept it. I'll help in return for help. And I do want to destroy Voldemort. I think it's the only way to make our world safe from his madness. But I don't want to rule over others."

Terry cocked his head. "Hmmm," he murmured. "Well. I'll need to think about it a bit more, and have conversations with a few more people. Politicians are good liars, after all. But one of my aunts is on the monitoring board. I can talk to her, too, and see what she thinks."

"Which one is she?" Harry asked. He didn't know most of the Light wizards and witches they'd inducted onto the monitoring board. They were candidates that Griselda and Aurora agreed on, and they had sworn the oaths, and that was enough for him.

“Elena Gilliam.”

Harry thought he remembered her now, a sandy-haired halfblood witch with an air of quiet confidence. “Do talk to her, Boot,” he encouraged him. “I want to leave enough room for everyone to make up their own minds.”

“Just the fact that you’re doing that raises you in my estimation,” Terry said, and actually bowed to him a little before he turned away.

“How can you endure insults like that?” Draco asked, the moment Terry was out of earshot. Or perhaps he asked that before Terry was out of earshot. Harry didn’t really know, and didn’t really care. He was flooded with sunlight at the thought of people thinking about him, instead of simply leaping to conclusions based on what he’d done for werewolves or what they’d read in the Prophet or what they felt, as had happened under Dumbledore’s spell last year. This was free will in flood, and of course some of it would be turned against him. He had to be willing to listen to his opponents.

He was looking forward to the first meeting with the monitoring board, Harry realized, with faint surprise.

“What insults?” he responded to Draco, still watching Terry go. And some of the people who had been listening to them had thoughtful expressions on their faces, not stupid or adoring ones. It made Harry want to laugh and dance and sing. “He was honest about everything. That doesn’t mean he was insulting.”

“He questioned your motivations.” Draco was practically vibrating next to him. “How many times do you have to say, again and again, that you aren’t going to be a Lord before people understand you?”

“I would rather say it a hundred thousand times than intimidate one person out of asking me questions,” Harry said quietly, studying Draco with a faint frown. It was true that he’d asked Draco to watch out for political realities around him, and that Draco saw more than he did, but it almost seemed as if— “Draco, do you really think I want all the notice and attention that goes with being a Lord, let alone the

unquestioning acceptance?" he asked. "I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. That's not the truth at all."

"I think you have the right to demand to be taken at your word." Draco's eyes were dark. "And not to have to answer questions that are obvious and rude."

Harry shook his head and started moving towards the Transfiguration classroom. Professor Bulstrode was unforgiving of late students. "It would save some time. But I want to be questioned, Draco. What I don't appreciate is refusal to recognize reality, whether that's on an opposite side or my own."

Draco took a few deep breaths through his nose. Harry could feel his sworn companions behind him, watching intently, and Michael's gaze in particular. He would be wondering if a fight between Draco and Harry increased his own chances of flirting with or dating Draco. Harry felt sorry for him, but on top of that, he was mystified. What in the world had given Michael the impression that he had a chance?

"It seems that this is something we'll agree to disagree on, Harry." Draco's voice was resigned. "I agree with Camellia. You should be able to have what you want, what you need, even at Hogwarts. Saving the wizarding world a time or two entitles you to that. If you decide that you want to do without the monitoring board, or to visit your pack, who is anyone alive to tell you no?"

"But I want the monitoring board." Harry turned to face him in the hall. He would take Henrietta's detention or scolding or, most likely, combination of both. It would even help to demonstrate that he followed and obeyed rules like the normal students. "It's part of the compromise, yes, but it's also a chance for people like Terry to make up their own minds, by its very existence. I did tell you this already, Draco. Shouldn't you take me at my word, as you were so upset about Terry not doing?"

Draco's face turned white, and he cast a privacy ward around them that shut even the sworn companions out. Glancing at them, Harry saw Owen putting a hand on Michael's arm and shaking his head, and Syrinx standing patiently against a wall. Since Harry hadn't

indicated that he didn't want the privacy ward, Harry thought, she would not burst through it.

"I've found a decree that says the existence of the monitoring board as a whole is illegal," said Draco steadily, eyes fastened on him. "Lord-level wizards are supposed to have a certain freedom in dealing with the Ministry, and something like this should never have been allowed."

Harry winced. Well. I suppose this was an unavoidable consequence of asking him to watch out for my political interests.

"Don't interfere, Draco," he said. "I'm asking you not to."

"I wasn't planning on it unless they did something to restrict your freedom," said Draco. "But when you say that you want someone to question you—Harry, they don't want to do that. They're not as honest as you think they are. They're not going to create a space where people can exercise their free wills, in the end. They're going to make sure that you compromise yours."

Harry stirred restlessly. "Do you have any proof that they're not as honest as you think they are, Draco?"

"Not yet," said Draco. "Other than some articles in the Populi I think were written by someone on the monitoring board."

"Those have no names attached!"

"Nonetheless."

Harry sighed and raked his hand through his hair, then decided that absolute honesty and only absolute honesty would do. He stepped forward and gripped Draco's shoulder, staring directly into his eyes.

"I want the monitoring board here," he said quietly. "I know that you don't. I appreciate that you're willing to look out for my interests even when I can't, Draco. I love you. I don't know if I can convey how much I love you with words, and kissing in the middle of a corridor isn't ideal,

either.” By now, Draco’s face was flushing, but when he opened his mouth to speak, Harry shook his head.

“But in this, I have to ask that you wait to strike at the monitoring board until you have proof of wrongdoing,” said Harry. “I am no Lord, Draco. I never want to be. I never want to demand unreasonable prices from my political opponents, and asking for the end of the monitoring board I proposed would be unreasonable at this point. And that means that I can’t use the exception that you found, either. It’s relying on my magical power, or rather, the threat of my magical power and the precedent of how others with extreme magical powers have been treated, to get me out of trouble. I don’t want to slip and slide out on loopholes.”

“You’re too Gryffindor for your own good,” Draco muttered, sounding as if his throat were full of spiderwebs. “Too interested in curing problems instead of preventing them from arising in the first place.”

Harry smiled sadly. “Maybe I am.” He did kiss Draco, a quick, chaste peck to the side of his mouth that unfortunately made Harry think of other things. Already, he’d had to build several barriers to keep his mind off sex; it seemed that the Breaking of Boundaries had shattered the strongest ones of his training, which blocked his hormones. It was damn inconvenient, was what it was, Harry thought. “But I do ask that you wait. That’s all. I can’t force you to. But I can ask.”

There was a long moment when Draco stared at him and said nothing. Then he bobbed his head quickly.

“If I must,” he said.

“Thank you,” Harry said, and then cast a Tempus charm and cursed. “We are late for Transfiguration, Draco.”

He dispelled the privacy ward, and they ran. Halfway there, Owen and Michael had to turn to go to their own classes, as seventh-year students. Harry was sure that he could feel Michael’s gaze on the back of his neck until he peeled off, and that it was resentful.

Finding out who wrote those articles in the Vox Populi would be a good start, because it would show him that the monitoring board doesn't want what's best for him, after all.

"Mr. Malfoy."

He looked up. Henrietta's glare was no less intimidating through her younger disguise than it had ever been.

"This is a simple spell that you should have been able to perform by now," she said, her voice clipped. "For a wizard of your innate power, it is easy. You will write a foot-long essay on what you have been doing wrong, and present it to me on Wednesday morning."

Draco clamped his teeth together and bowed his head. "Yes, ma'am," he murmured, and returned to his seat, while Henrietta called Granger forward to Transfigure Potter back. That she managed it on the first try didn't make Draco feel any better.

Harry squeezed his wrist as he sat down again, and Draco looked straight into his sympathetic smile, though he didn't say anything. Bulstrode had proven herself annoyingly good at sensing the slightest stray efforts at conversation.

Draco felt his resolve twist away from annoyance into simple certainty as he watched Harry's smile. Harry could go on right on believing what he liked about his own status and his own problems. Draco would not openly oppose him, and he would not go behind Harry's back, as Lucius had tried to do with Narcissa. He would simply find the truth and show it to Harry.

There's no reason that we can't approach each other in equality, with the truth. What else have we both fought for?

It was meant in good faith, but that thought sent Draco off into daydreams of what else, personally, he had fought for in his relationship with Harry, and earned him a detention when Professor Bulstrode demanded an answer to a question from him and he nearly said something obscene. At least Harry stroked Draco's hand sympathetically again while stifling his laughter.

Chapter Forty-Seven: In Quest of Balance

"I don't see why you should."

"Because they requested it," said Harry, glancing at Draco. "And I don't have any reason to refuse." The letter lay on the bed between them. Harry had actually been trying to complete his Transfiguration homework, as well as the extra lines that Henrietta had assigned him for being late to her class. Draco was complaining about the letter, and had been for the last half-hour. At least he had given up on convincing Harry of the evil of the monitoring board, and was instead insisting that they had no right to require him to attend a meeting with them that weekend.

"The Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch game is this weekend," Draco tried.

Harry smiled. "And I'm not playing in it, remember? I'm sure Sam will do fine."

"He's not—" said Draco, and then shut his mouth and looked the other way.

"Were you about to say that isn't as good a flyer as Connor is?" Harry couldn't help the laughter bubbling up in his throat. "Or does it kill you that a Gryffindor could do better at something than a Slytherin could?"

"He's not as good a Seeker as you are, I meant to say." Draco glared at him. "The team would have accepted you back if you insisted on it."

"And I didn't." Harry was growing tired of this. He understood why it mattered to Draco; if nothing else, it was a distraction from Lucius's stupid behavior and the worry over what his father might do out of stubborn pride. But Harry didn't have that same stubborn pride of his own, and Draco saying he should became more and more wearing. "Sam flies better with them, now. And I already answered Madam Whitestag, and said that I would attend the meeting on Saturday. This will be the first full gathering of the monitoring board, given that the

Dark wizards and witches offered a place on it didn't attend last time. It's important."

"Did she say I couldn't come?" Draco lifted his chin.

Harry shook his head. "Both you and Snape are welcome. That ought to show that she doesn't intend anything evil, surely? If she really wanted to weaken me, she would try to separate the two of you from me."

"She's waiting," said Draco, folding his arms. "When you trust her, and are less likely to turn on her the moment something happens, then she'll move."

"If she moves," said Harry, with what he thought was a generous helping of patience, "then she'll surely reveal herself. Do you think she's a more subtle political dancer than your mother, Draco? Narcissa has a place on the board. So do Hawthorn, and Adalrico, and Ignifer. Do you think Madam Whitestag can do something that will go ignored by all of them?"

He probably forgot that, Harry realized, as he watched Draco's face drop. He defends me so well that he forgets he's not the only protector I have.

Draco chewed his lip for a moment, then sighed. "No," he said. "But I told you my reasons for being unhappy with the board, Harry. It's still illegal, and the Minister could still dissolve it if you asked him to."

"I won't be asking him," said Harry, turning his back so that he could work on his Transfiguration homework more effectively. "And if someone else does ask him, I'll know the source of the request."

Sullen silence answered him. Harry concentrated fiercely on the words in front of him, until they threatened to blur.

I don't know why he can't accept that this is my choice. I have to have restraints and people questioning me. The monitoring board might not be that reasonable on the matters most important to us, but they'll

give the more reasonable people a chance to pluck up their courage and start thinking instead of reacting.

And Harry was firmly convinced that it was, indeed, working. Terry Boot had come up to him, after all, and so had a few of the Hufflepuffs who had opposed him last year, Susan Bones and Ernie Macmillan. They'd spoken in cold but courteous voices, and asked questions, including a very good one from Susan that Harry had felt unprepared to completely answer. And he was grateful to her for that.

"And what happens if someone asks you to make a sacrifice for the good of the wizarding world that hurts one small portion of it?" Her voice still echoed in his head, and her eyes were steady and accusing. "If you did have to choose between sacrificing werewolves and everyone else, what would happen?"

Harry knew the answer to that, of course. It would depend, first of all, on who "everyone else" was, and how the werewolves were being threatened. But then would come his oath to defend werewolves' rights, which would turn his blood to silver unless he kept it. And it would be pitiful if that were his only reason, his only motive. He ought to be above simple practical necessities. He ought to be able to provide ethical reasoning to back up his actions, reasoning that could convince those who did not care about his vates duties, and who were not interested in hypothetical situations.

If he could not communicate with the people who regularly read the Daily Prophet and the Vox Populi, Harry tended to think the problem lay with himself, not with them.

So it was a good thing that he was being held back, and challenged, and forced to examine his own morals and mistakes closely. It was a good thing that he would be called to account. And with Madam Whitestag in charge of the monitoring board, he could be sure the account would be close and honest.

He only wished he could communicate his sense of hope and excitement about this to Draco.

their expectations of the Ministry and what they could expect from Scrimgeour. Lisa caught her eye and slid into a corner, raising her brows on the way.

“Draco Malfoy,” Aurora murmured. “He despises everyone who doesn’t act like a pureblood. Ask questions about the Grand Unified Theory. Don’t speak exactly like the image of a pureblood witch urges you should. Keep him from following Harry when I talk to him in private at the end of the meeting.”

Lisa smiled faintly and nodded. She was proud of being a pureblood in her own way, Aurora thought, but the death of her son had severely shaken whatever faith she might have put in Harry. And she despised those purebloods like the Malfoys who set a certain standard of behavior on the surface and pretended that was all that mattered, as if courtesy somehow excused them from being immoral.

She took her place at the end of the table. Aurora made her way to the seat directly across from Harry. She had Madam Marchbanks on one side and the southern goblin on the other. She wondered if they had intended to disconcert her. If so, they would fail.

She sat down and fixed her eyes on Harry's. His own gaze was far from challenging, but hopeful and even relaxed.

He does wish to cooperate with us. If we can only isolate him, then everything will be well. Aurora had a speech prepared she thought should work, especially since Harry himself obviously thought the monitoring board such a good idea.

She leaned forward, smiled at Harry, and began the questioning. “Tell us about your last week, vates.”

[illegible]

Harry cocked his head. Simple questions. Well, I can do that. He felt Snape's presence at his shoulder, just waiting for someone to do something wrong, and Draco sneering down the table at Lisa

Addlington, who hadn't taken her chair in the most graceful manner. He hoped neither would interfere. He wanted to do this on his own, and their suspicions wouldn't help.

"I've made good progress at fitting back into Hogwarts, I think," he told Aurora, who nodded. "I've been attending the same classes I attended before the rebellion began. Those include NEWT Transfiguration, NEWT Defense Against the Dark Arts, and NEWT Potions."

"I have a question," said a wizard down the table suddenly. Harry turned to look at him. He was a man with white hair, but a young face. Harry vaguely remembered that he was their token Muggleborn wizard on the board, and that he called himself Shadow. "Is it truly fair for you to be in the NEWT Potions class, Harry? After all, Professor Snape teaches that class, and yet he's your guardian, and everyone knows how he favors Slytherins." His eyes were burning holes as they fixed on Snape.

"I think it would be less fair if Professor Snape tutored me outside the class, sir," Harry said. "That would imply special treatment, and privileges that I don't want to receive."

"There are others who could give you Potions lessons." Shadow flapped a hand, obviously considering his objection unimportant. "Horace Slughorn, for example. Didn't he take over the Potions Master post a short time ago?"

"He did, sir," Harry said, wondering where this was going. "And he acted as Head of Slytherin House, at the request of the Headmistress."

"I think he would be a better teacher for you, by far." By now, Shadow's face carried deep lines of anger. "At least that way we would know that a Death Eater was not in charge of teaching the future vates how to make delicate poisons and explosive concoctions."

Harry sensed Snape's rage like tendrils yanking across his skin. "I am a former Death Eater," said Snape, each word a crack of black ice. "I

served as a spy for the Light, and was exonerated when I came to trial.”

“Yes.” Shadow leaned forward across the table, arms folded. “By the word of Albus Dumbledore, the very man who abused and tormented the child you now serve as guardian to. Was that that way it was? Passing Harry from one master to another, so that he might never escape the controlling web of Dumbledore’s influence?”

“Shadow!” Aurora said sharply. “I will not have this. Professor Snape does speak the truth. He was exonerated.” She turned away from the Muggleborn wizard with a small shake of her head and fixed her eyes on Harry, ignoring Snape’s huffing breath. “However, he does raise a legitimate point, Harry. Do you feel that Professor Snape treats you fairly? Would you feel more comfortable in separate Potions lessons?”

“I can only repeat what I said before, Madam Whitestag.” Harry worked to keep his own fury out of his voice. Shadow obviously hated Death Eaters. Harry couldn’t see this as an attack on Snape. He would probably attack Hawthorn or Adalrico the same way. “I think that would imply a mark of privilege that I wish to avoid. I want to be ordinary, insofar as I can be. I want the other students to see that the professors treat me, well, like them. I did receive a punishment of extra lines this week, from Professor Belluspersonna, for being late to her Transfiguration class. She is teaching me the way I wish to be taught. And as for Professor Snape—” Harry swallowed. He couldn’t say that Snape had never rewarded him unfairly in class; he had done plenty of that in Harry’s first year, when he tried to separate him from Connor. “He may have done so in the past, but he and I are both trying to move beyond that point.”

Aurora sighed, a small, delicate sound of disappointment. “I understand, Harry. But it does make for an awkward situation, always, when a professor has children at the school.” She might have gone on, but a loud slap of parchment being set down interrupted her. Harry caught sight of a genuinely annoyed expression on her face as she looked down the table. “Yes, Mr. Gildgrace, what is it?”

“If I might,” said Marvin, the halfblood wizard Harry remembered disliking, and being pressured into allowing on the board. Aurora had pointed out, quite rightly, that they had too few non-pureblood candidates to dismiss one, and if Marvin said he was not prejudiced against goblins and centaurs, Harry had no reason to distrust him. “I have made a study of how many Dark wizards have sworn to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, as compared to the number of Light wizards who have, and the numbers are still pitifully few.” He faced Harry. “Why have you not made an effort to recruit more Light allies, Mr. Pott—vates?”

“I am in negotiations right now to do this,” said Harry, glad he was able to say something positive. “I am speaking with the children of several prominent Light families at Hogwarts, who were driven from any chance of allying with me by the child abuse accusations against Albus Dumbledore. I think I will quickly have a longer list of allies to present to you.”

Marvin sniffed and squinted down at his parchment. “I must say, vates, that some of your allies are impressive. The Rosier-Henlin family, for example. Even if gained through not quite...legitimate means, they do have good reputations. It is their Declaration that is the problem, not that they’ve been accused of crimes.”

Narcissa sat up across the table. “And what would you consider legitimate means, Mr. Gildgrace?” she asked sweetly.

“Why, if Harry had approached them himself, of course,” said Marvin, glancing at her. “Instead, it seems that he used someone else to dance for him. Someone with a good many political connections, and excellent powers of persuasion, but still a second party. I can say that that won’t work with most Light wizards. They need to see the real product, as it were.” He gave Harry a faint smile. “Meet you face-to-face, Harry. Many of them do believe that’s the only way to truly judge someone.”

Harry nodded. “I understand.”

“I was the person who approached his Dark allies,” said Narcissa quietly.

Marvin raised his eyebrows. "I was not accusing you, Mrs. Malfoy, but that is interesting to know for certain." He scribbled a quick note down on his parchment. "I do believe, though, Mrs. Malfoy, that the Light-allied wizards would object to your doing it again, for—well, the reasons I told you." He peered at her apologetically. "And the name of Malfoy is no longer exactly untainted in their eyes, if it has ever been, given your husband's recent break from Harry."

"I am not my husband." Narcissa had never looked cooler or more elegant, Harry thought, as she sat there and calmly refuted every assumption Marvin threw at her. "I have chosen to follow my son and his joined partner, and I do not regret that."

"And you've chosen to become part of this board." Marvin nodded. "I approve of all of that, Mrs. Malfoy. I hope you don't think I'm being hostile. I just wanted to make the point that Harry needs more Light allies, and he won't be able to rely on you to secure them."

Narcissa gave a minute bow of her head and sat back, but Harry could see the narrowing of her eyes. Now she was wondering how deep Marvin's knowledge of her ran, and how he knew that she had been the one to dance for him to the Rosier-Henlin family and others. And where he had obtained this information in the first place, of course. It would make her a little warier before moving.

Of course, if what he's saying is true, then it's better we know this now, so that we don't offend any of the Light wizards, Harry thought.

"I hope not all those allies will be purebloods," Lisa Addlington offered from the end of the table. "Thanks to the Grand Unified Theory, we know that they are not the only chosen children of magic, now. Or I hope we do." She gave a superior look along the table, and Harry felt Draco stir beside him.

"Of course not all of them will be purebloods," he said, with a bored expression on his face. "But that doesn't mean that the purebloods in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow should be disregarded, or assigned a lower place than they one they've achieved."

"I don't recall addressing you, Mr. Malfoy." Lisa's own eyes were narrow. "You're neither on the monitoring board nor under the supervision of it. I have to wonder why you accompanied Harry, today. Are the Dark purebloods so desperate for influence that they must have eyes everywhere?"

"I came because he's my lover, my partner in a joining ritual, and my equal in every area of life," said Draco, and his voice had tightened. "Will you tell me to leave him alone because of that, Addlington?"

"For someone who prides himself on courtesy, you forget titles easily." Lisa tossed her head, and Harry saw Draco's disgust increase exponentially. "I would prefer to be addressed by Mrs. Addlington, and not solely by my husband's last name. I need not shelter in his shadow."

Draco started to retort, and Harry placed a hand gently on his arm. "I agree that I need more Light allies, and more non-pureblood allies," he said. "Can you suggest a good place for me to start, Mrs. Addlington?"

Lisa smiled at him. "Of course I can." She took a piece of parchment from her pocket, and Harry whispered a Summoning Charm that brought it to him. Opening it, he saw a list of names. "They begin with some halfblood cousins of mine," Lisa added, "but not everyone on that list is a relative of mine, I assure you."

Harry nodded, scanning the list rapidly. He recognized a few of the last names from Hogwarts, and thought he might start working from them. "Thank you, Mrs. Addlington," he said, folding the parchment and tucking it into a pocket of his robes. He faced Aurora again. If he could conduct a conversation mainly with her, then it might ease the temptation for Draco, or Snape, to snipe or be sniped at. "The monitoring board was supposed to instruct me on certain Light pureblood rituals and customs, I know," he said. "Whom did you have in mind for a teacher, Madam Whitestag?"

"I was expecting to split the task equally between myself and Madam Marchbanks," said Aurora, blinking as if she hadn't expected the question. "We would certainly not wish you to go uninstructed, Harry.

Though I am undeclared myself, I do know the customs of the Light better than those of the Dark. And of course Madam Marchbanks quite literally has more than a century of experience.” She gave the older witch a smile that Harry noticed she didn’t return.

Harry looked carefully at Madam Marchbanks. She was frowning at several of the Light wizards along the table, as if she wanted to object to them but couldn’t quite find the words to do so. “Madam?” he asked, and she looked back at him. “Do you agree to instruct me, along with Madam Whitestag?”

She nodded at him. “I can meet with you twice a month,” she said. “Or I can send you post with questions and lists of instructions in the rituals. Or I can send you books.”

“If you can manage it, I would prefer all three of those options,” said Harry, and was gratified to see a look of surprise on Aurora’s face. A moment later, she smiled at him. Harry dipped his head, his own smile breaking out. She’ll see now that I really do want to cooperate with them. “The meetings may be the hardest to arrange, but I will try to shift my schedule to accommodate yours, Madam.”

Aurora glanced casually up and down the table. “Are there any other questions that anyone else wished to ask the vates? I am sure that most of us can agree that the measures Harry has taken to acquire more Light allies and learn the Light rituals are adequate for now, and that he may remain in the classes he currently occupies in Hogwarts.” She bent over a piece of parchment in front of her, scribbling rapidly on it. Harry assumed it was a private checklist of some kind, perhaps the minutes of the meeting or a reminder of what she hoped to accomplish with each one.

“I do have a suggestion,” said Shadow, and leaned forward again. “I would like to visit one of the Potions classes during which Professor Snape teaches the vates. Or, at least, I think someone from the monitoring board should visit them, though I can’t imagine why either Professor Snape or Harry would object to my presence.” He flashed a sneer at Snape, which produced the retort Harry had expected.

“If you believe that I will allow someone intent on upsetting my son into my classroom for the sole purpose of upsetting him—”

“Shadow does not intend to upset Harry, Professor,” said Aurora sharply. “We can assign a different observer, if he troubles you so much. And—forgive me, but I did not know that you had claimed formal adoption of Harry. That is certainly a change in his status that the monitoring board should have been informed of.” She looked at Harry, who was forced to shake his head.

“I am Professor Snape’s ward still, Madam,” he said. “He is my legal guardian. But he does call me son, and I consider him a father.” He felt his face burn as the monitoring board stared at him in silence, even the Dark wizards. It was the first time he had ever said something like this in public.

“Congratulations to you both,” said Hawthorn, sounding sincere about it. His other Dark allies were quick to add their praise, Harry noted, far better than the weak applause that Lisa Addlington gave, and which was the only response he noted at all from the Light wizards.

“And of course the notion of sending an observer into Professor Snape’s Potions classes is perfectly ridiculous,” Hawthorn went on, blithely. “He would not accomplish his purpose. Both Professor Snape and his son would act differently in front of an observer, and he would not be able to see what a normal day for them is like. That is nothing to say what other students of the class would do.”

“We could send someone under an Invisibility Charm,” Lisa suggested.

“It’s called a Disillusionment Charm, you uneducated—”

“Draco,” Harry hissed under his breath. He glanced at his boyfriend’s narrowed eyes and flared nostrils, and shook his head. He had not realized how strongly Draco was prejudiced against anyone who supported the Grand Unified Theory. I must never leave him and Hermione alone together for any length of time. “I apologize, Mrs. Addlington,” he added, while Lisa looked on, silently scandalized.

“That wasn’t what we intended by my partner’s attendance here today.” He clamped his hand on Draco’s arm and gave it a little shake.

Draco gave him a cool glance, then turned around and nodded stiffly to Lisa. “Sorry, Madam.” Still not the name that she had asked to be called by, Harry noted.

Harry sighed and faced Aurora, only to find that she’d slid the parchment she was writing on across the table to him. Neither Snape, glaring at everyone indiscriminately, nor Draco, glaring at Lisa, seemed to have noted. Harry read it quickly, upside-down.

May I speak privately with you after this?

Harry caught Aurora’s eye and nodded. He couldn’t blame her for wanting that, given the disruptions and petty arguments of the meeting. She sat back, relaxing, and smiled at him, which made him more sure that he’d done the right thing. It would not be a bad thing to be on friendly terms with the main power of the monitoring board, Harry thought. For better or worse, many of the Light wizards would follow her.

And for better or worse, Draco and Snape will follow me.

When he thought of how they’d behaved today—well, how Draco had behaved today, at least; the argument with Shadow was not nearly as much Snape’s fault—Harry felt his cheeks burn. And so he spoke up now, as there was a temporary lull in the conversation.

“I do consider Professor Snape my father,” he said firmly, “and I will not condone visits to his class that might cast doubt on his guardianship.” He stood with a glance up and down the table. “Does anyone else have anything else to ask me?”

No one else did. Draco was standing as if he would drag Harry from the room, though, so Harry went on speaking. “Then, Madam Whitestag, I can ask you what I wanted to ask you. May we speak privately for a moment?”

Draco turned his head, eyes intent and brow furrowed, but since Harry had said he was the one with the question, those were the only gestures he made. Harry shook his head, and Draco sighed. He seemed to know he hadn't made a good showing today, though, and didn't protest further.

Snape was more vocal. “I would like to be present for any conversation between Harry and another person,” he said.

Harry touched his arm, and left his hand there until Snape looked, reluctantly, down at him. "Please, Severus," Harry murmured, remembering the name this time. "This isn't about a legal matter." He would leave if it turned out to be. "I want to do this."

Snape stared back into his eyes, and Harry let a few of his Occlumency barriers fall. He had to repress his impatience to do it. Why are both of them being so protective of me? They won't even believe that I can decide, on my own, to cooperate with the monitoring board, or to speak with one person? What do they think she'll do, secretly turn into a Light Lady and pin me to the wall?

Perhaps Snape sensed the impatience, or the thoughts behind it, because he gave a slight nod and stepped aside. Harry sighed with relief, added, "Thank you for coming," to the rest of the monitoring board, and then followed Aurora out into the Atrium.

He cast a privacy ward around them before they began talking, and checked himself for tracking spells. He loved Draco and Snape, but he wouldn't put it past them to spy on his and Aurora's conversation.

“What did you want to speak with me about, Madam Whitestag?” he asked.

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Aurora considered him for a moment. Harry looked calmly back at her, his eyes intent and shining. And Aurora had to smile, because it was painfully obvious, now, that Harry really did want the freedom of will and debate that he had said he did; it was overprotective allies, and

perhaps Dark wizards determined to secure their personal power and their position close to him, who had made him seem otherwise. He had rebelled against the Ministry because they had given him no other choice, not because he was in love with violence or getting his own way.

Her strategy had changed even from the beginning of the meeting, when she realized that few of Harry's Dark allies would speak in this meeting of the monitoring board; they were still learning the names of those involved and seeing how they reacted. The elaborate traps and baffles they had laid were nearly useless in such a situation. But Harry was growing as exasperated by the behavior of his allies as he was by the behavior of Shadow and Marvin. Aurora hoped still to win a victory that would make giving up the presence of a few Light wizards on the board worth it.

"Harry," she said, and clasped her hands in front of her. "I am sorry, but I don't think the board will work as it stands."

She saw his face waver into concern. "Why not, Madam?" he asked, and ran a hand through his hair. It seemed to be his standard nervous gesture. "I know that Draco and Snape had arguments with the board members today, but—"

"While I'm not excusing the behavior of your allies, I need to apologize for the behavior of mine," Aurora interrupted quietly. "I had no idea they would be this hostile. And insinuations and rumors and glances can do even more to hurt than outright insults. I am concerned with what Marvin implied about Mrs. Malfoy, for example."

Harry shrugged. "It is true that she danced and gathered Dark allies for me, Madam. But I will be more than willing to contact Light families myself."

How did he draw so powerful a woman, so young? But Aurora suspected that had much to do with Draco Malfoy's close place at Harry's side, so she wasn't as concerned. It was not a trick Harry could duplicate with anyone else. "I am glad," she said. "But I would not wish future meetings to be as unproductive as this one. I wish an environment where we can speak and interact comfortably. I am

willing to dismiss Shadow and Marvin from the board, if you think it would help.”

Harry’s face was troubled. He opened his mouth, then shut it and shook his head. Aurora waited. At last he said, “But we would have to find more Light wizards to replace them, wouldn’t we? And in the meantime, the work of the monitoring board couldn’t go forward.”

“That is true.” Aurora tilted her head. “Except—“

“Yes?”

“Technically,” Aurora said, “Griselda and I count as Light witches on the board, too, so it is already overweighted. I am not declared, of course, but most people treat me as though I am, and most of my morals and my closest associations are with the Light. I would be willing to dismiss Shadow and Marvin, and count Griselda and myself as two of the eleven needed to balance the Dark allies. If you would accept this, of course. I am sure that I can convince my allies to accept it.”

She held her breath, and tried not to make it look as if she were doing so. She had taken a gamble, but if she understood Harry as she hoped, it would win her something much larger.

Harry sighed. “But you and Griselda are supposed to be neutral,” he said. “Or, at least, you balance each other out. I counted Madam Marchbanks as a friend before the board began, and you as an opponent.” Aurora was pleased that he did not say “enemy.” “If you dismiss two of the Light wizards, I should dismiss two of the Dark ones.”

“But I doubt many of them would take that well,” Aurora said mildly. In truth, she wanted to retain Harry’s Dark allies as long as she could, until she could draw them and see who must be countered, who could be ignored, and who could be useful. Like it or not, she was now in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, and these were the core of what she had to work with. So long as she did not violate the oaths to cause fear in others, and thought about her actions, she believed she could get along with them. “I am willing to give up Marvin and

Shadow, Harry. They work well with other Light wizards, but not with Dark ones. I am sorry. I should have studied them more closely before I presented them as candidates for the monitoring board.”

Harry stirred unhappily. Finally, he said, “I could—I could leave Draco and Snape at Hogwarts when I meet with the board in the future, Madam. As a good faith gesture. I think we should try at least one meeting without any of the ones who caused the most controversy today.”

Yes. Aurora had what she wanted. She knew she was lucky to have distracted Snape and Malfoy as much as she had today. They were meeting with the full board for the first time, and in the future they would be warier and more alert for threats to Harry. One meeting without them would be a blessing for her cause. “I am glad that you think so, Harry,” she said. “And what about Mrs. Addlington? Should—“

“No.” Harry’s face tightened with exasperation. “Most of the problems there originated with Draco, and I will ask him to apologize to her, Madam.” He lifted his head and stared intently into her eyes, reminding Aurora that he was a Legilimens. “I want to work with you,” he whispered. “I mean it, Madam. Please. Please let me do this.”

Aurora nodded, slowly. The reluctance she felt was real. Harry needed to be played on the line like a fish right now. Draw in him too tight, ask him to make too many sacrifices, and either he or his allies would balk. She would rather move slowly than risk everything to get what she wanted a little faster. “All right, Harry. You can tell Professor Snape and young Mr. Malfoy that they can attend the third meeting, if you wish.”

“Thank you,” said Harry. “And don’t worry, Madam. I will make them understand. Shadow provoked Professor Snape, but Draco’s behavior was inexcusable.”

Aurora smiled, and let the light of it shine out of her eyes. “And how are you, Harry? Are you sleeping well? Eating well? Have you taken any time for yourself in the last few days?”

Oddly, that was a mistake; she saw it as soon as she asked. Harry's eyes shuttered, and he gave her the look of some wild animal shying from a trap. His voice was clipped when he spoke. "I eat three meals a day, Madam, and sleep eight hours each night, and I take as much time for myself as I need."

Aurora sighed. "I reminded you of something evil, didn't I? I did not mean to. I am sorry, Harry."

He relaxed bit by bit, and now looked abashed. "I'm sorry, Madam Whitestag. But I do have to put up with that kind of questioning from Professor Snape, and Draco, and the Seer we have in residence."

Does he? And Aurora grasped another piece of the puzzle that was Harry vates. "Then I will ask nothing more," she said. "I want the monitoring board to be what you need, Harry. And if others are attending to your physical and emotional needs—"

"You can help me with my political and intellectual ones." Harry stood straight now, smiling easily. "And I need reasonable opponents right now, Madam, who are still willing to work with me."

He is exactly what the world requires to defend us from Voldemort. Just a bit of guidance, that's all he needs, not much. Aurora relaxed. "Then I will endeavor to be that for you, Harry, though if you continue to be so reasonable yourself, I may soon lose my opponent status," she said, and he laughed.

"Thank you," he murmured, and dropped the privacy ward, making his way back to his guardian and lover.

Aurora watched him go with a deep sense of contentment. He might not Declare, he might not call himself a Lord, he might not even have trained as much as she would have liked him to in the means of defeating the Dark Lord, but she was starting to think that he would be a better leader than she could ever have dreamed.

And if I can play some small part in making our world safe, then I will consider that enough. Nothing can even make up for the loss of my children, just as nothing can ever make up for Harry's childhood.

What we must be content with is the aftermath, the future, the moving-forward.

Chapter Forty-Eight: Tea and a Cup of Philosophy

Harry kept the set of his shoulders as relaxed as he could, considering that Snape had just herded both him and Draco into his private quarters and shut the door behind them. He hadn't had a chance to speak to Connor and ask who had won the Gryffindor-Slytherin game, though from the glimpse he'd caught of his brother's beaming face, he suspected he knew. The new Slytherin Seeker was good, and probably faster than Connor since he was smaller, but Harry had watched him, and he simply couldn't match the skill Connor showed in making swift turns, hovering, and diving in such a way that his opponent's eyes would miss him.

"Please sit down," Snape said, in a voice that Harry hadn't heard from him in a long time. In fact, as he turned to face Snape, warily, he was fairly sure that he hadn't heard it before. But he took a seat on the couch, and Draco sat down beside him, still fuming. Harry had asked him to apologize to Lisa as they left the Ministry, and had received an incredulous stare, along with a snapped comment that his one apology to her already counted.

"I'm sitting down, sir," he told Snape. "What's wrong?"

Snape ignored him for a moment, waving his wand to conjure teacups and a tray, and then nodding to cabinets in the far corner of the room. They unlocked themselves, and a crock of milk and a pot of tea surged out of them, floating over to the tray. Harry stirred uneasily. "You've become skilled in Transfiguration since I was last here, sir," he ventured.

"This is tea that I brewed, not conjured," said Snape, not looking at him.

Harry relaxed. He would gladly drink it either way, but he was happiest to hear that it hadn't come from reliance on house elf labor, which would have made it impossible for him to drink. He waited for Snape to pour cups for him and Draco, since that seemed to be what he wanted, and then sipped. The tea was hot and sweet enough just as it was. He would never understand why Draco wanted so much milk in his.

Snape turned to face him, taking a seat on the chair. Harry watched him carefully. The lines of his face were locked in a brooding mask, but that was hardly unusual. Did he have a dream last night that shook him? He should have told me. I would have been glad to leave him at Hogwarts today.

"I should not have let myself be distracted like that, into arguing with a man who has reason to hate me," said Snape, in a voice of deep calm. "However, my distraction came from a legitimate source, Harry. I was using Legilimency to read what I could of their thoughts, without alerting them to the fact. Since many of them do know I can do so, I had to catch their eyes in short glimpses and learn what I could from those."

Harry felt his hand tighten on the teacup so quickly that it was a miracle it didn't shatter. Carefully, he set it down on the broad, flat arm of the couch and sat up. Draco leaned against him, heavily, as if to prevent him from standing. Harry didn't try. He intended to stay right here and confront Snape about what he had done.

"These people are supposed to be our allies, sir." He kept his voice to one that could cut glass, away from insults. He could hardly treat Snape with less courtesy than he'd given to Aurora. "If they find out what you have done, they will have reason to demand that I not bring you to any meeting of the monitoring board, not just the next one."

"You didn't tell us about that," said Draco.

Yes, and this isn't the moment or way I would have chosen for telling you, either. But the damage was done, and Harry wouldn't take it back, or only spring the bargain with Aurora on them when they prepared to go to the next meeting of the monitoring board. "Madam Whitestag offered to dismiss Marvin Gildgrace and Shadow from the board, and let her own presence and Madam Marchbanks's make the Light rejoice," said Harry. He had to shove a load of emotions into the Occlumency pools, and shook his head as they seemed to bubble under the strain. His barriers never had been the same since the ritual on Halloween. "In return, I agreed to leave both of you behind for the next meeting."

“And isn’t this the exact same tactic you told me would make you wary of her?” Draco pounced the moment Harry stopped speaking. “You said, ‘If she really wanted to weaken me, she would try to separate the two of you from me.’”

Harry opened his mouth, then shut it. He clenched his hand on the couch arm for a moment, nearly upsetting his teacup, and said, picking his words carefully, “I don’t think she meant it like that—”

“She did,” said Snape. “That was a well-coordinated attack. Shadow came for me, Mrs. Addlington for Draco. I think she meant Gildgrace to draw Narcissa, but he did not succeed. Madam Marchbanks was too distracted and distressed by what happened around her to be aware that something was wrong, or connect the behavior of her allies into a concerted pattern aimed at us.” He breathed in silence for a long moment, his eyes locked on Harry’s. “And that is only as much as I managed to learn given the distracted way in which I looked,” he added. “I am sure there was more, hiding beneath the surface. Do you see, Harry? They are not your allies. They want to weaken you. They want to set boundaries on you that will hold you back from acting as vates, as an effective ally to the werewolves, as an effective Dark wizard.”

“I’m not a Dark wizard,” Harry pointed out. He was in too much of a daze to say anything else.

“For many Light wizards, using one Dark spell makes one a Dark wizard.” Snape sipped his tea, eyes never leaving Harry’s face. “I have even heard some of them doubt Scrimgeour’s loyalty to the Light, because he used the Ritual of Cinnatus, when I would say that there is no wizard alive right now whom they should trust more. And your mentor is Dark, your partner is Dark, those wizards who have stood by you for years are Dark. Making an overture to the Light is not as simple as offering them political power, Harry. They will be laboring to increase it, and in this case, that means restraining you and guiding you into certain channels.” His tone took on a more personal animosity. “And you will let them do it, if you allow yourself to be separated from those who love you. I have said once before

that sometimes you seem to care more about your enemies than your friends.”

Harry gave a shiver, and said nothing.

“I’d like an answer to that question, actually,” Draco said, voice bright and brittle. “Why do you offer chances to your allies that you don’t to us, Harry? Why would you not be as upset if a Light wizard who was a Legilimens read my thoughts, and Snape’s? I suspect you would make excuses for him. Why?”

Harry knew the answer to that. They were not going to like it. But then, when had they ever?

“Because the more objective someone is, the more likely he is to realize my mistakes when I make them,” said Harry quietly. He rushed on, though Draco was opening his mouth to speak. “Both of you want to protect me, I know that. But both of you might move too quickly when someone does have innocent intentions, or is only protecting their interests the way you would, were you in their place. Both of you may indulge me too often.” He turned to face Draco. “For example, you want me to dissolve the monitoring board. And then what would happen?”

“It would be dissolved,” said Draco. “And you would be free again.”

Harry shook his head. “The monitoring board was the compromise that ended the rebellion and brought Gloriana Griffinsnest to trial,” he said. “At the very least, the Light wizards could take back their evidence that’s going to convict Gloriana. At worst, they could say breaking one promise means I’ll break others, and so I can’t be trusted. And then everything we’ve fought for will have collapsed.”

“Not everything,” said Draco, his eyes shining fiercely. “I don’t know about you, Harry, but my greatest battle has been to see you happy and free. And the monitoring board being gone would relieve you of yet another burden you should never have had to carry.”

“I can’t simply dissolve it,” Harry told him.

“Not even if every Light wizard on it is against you?” Snape asked the question as if it were an idle one about Potions ingredients. “Not even if you have reason to believe that your life would improve in every way if it vanished?”

“You said that Madam Marchbanks isn’t against me,” Harry reminded him. “And she’s in close friendship with the southern goblins. If they told her about this, then she would side with us, not other Light wizards.”

“The fact remains that the board is filled with snakes, and that Madam Whitestag is the deadliest of them.” Snape’s cup rang as he put it down. “You will only increase your freedom if you rid yourself of them, and a vates must be free.”

“Both of you have a different definition of my freedom than I do,” said Harry, and his own voice rang with frustration. “Both of you think of it mostly in terms of what I can do. I think of it mostly in terms of what I’m able not to do.”

“Why?” Draco demanded.

Harry gave him a flat stare. “Because I’ve had to use my magic to solve so many problems already, and I’d rather offer people a choice and the freedom to make it,” he replied. “Because I don’t actually enjoy intimidating others; in fact, I hate it. Because I’d like to see multiple alliances forming and flourishing in the wizarding world, not just the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. If absolutely nothing else, I’d want such alliances to exist so I could see what reasonable people they might recruit whom we’d miss, because they were growing up in the strongholds of our enemies. I wish that I had made an invitation to Indigena Yaxley to join me first, you know.”

“I don’t understand that.” Draco, at the moment, with his arms crossed and his brow furrowed, looked determined not to understand it.

“And that’s your choice.” Harry shook his head, and stood up. “I have to decide what I’m going to do about this. Thank you for telling me, sir.” He could not thank Snape for reading their minds, and hoped

that Snape understood why. “I want to go and think. Alone,” he added, when Draco stood to accompany him.

“You should not be alone,” said Draco. “Just in case someone does manage to corner you in the grounds, Harry.”

Harry called his magic and let it briefly cloak his shoulders in a mantle of snow. It melted almost instantly in the heat of Snape's fire, but he thought he'd made his point. Harry spoke it anyway. "If I can't be safe with my magic within Hogwarts's wards, then I'm not safe anywhere, Draco, and certainly not in bed in your arms."

He turned and walked out of the room, feeling their eyes on his back all the way.

[illegible]

Rufus watched the wolf that stood in front of his desk. It watched him back.

The wolf's body was made of congealed gray mist, which made it look more like a natural wolf than Rufus would have thought it could. Now and then it licked its jaws, and though the tongue was white instead of pink, that also looked natural. When he did not say anything or do anything interesting immediately, it lay down and closed its eyes, a pale, astonishing blue.

Rufus peered into his cup of tea as if it might hold the answers. Nothing but tea looked back.

If you look into the tea, the tea looks into you, Rufus thought, and then closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and told himself to stop this. He knew what he had to do. There really was no other choice, not if he was to hold true to the principles that had guided him here in the first place.

It was only the thought of what might come after he made this decision that was frightening him. But the rebellion had ended, and he had made a truce with the Department of Mysteries, and the

monitoring board had not so far exploded in a shower of flesh and blood.

Of course, perhaps he would wake up in a few days to find that the rebellion had began again, and the Stone was sending its Unspeakables on their silent missions again, and that he was needed to help sort out pieces of Aurora Whitestag from those of a dozen other witches and wizards. And two goblins and one centaur, of course.

Rufus took one more deep breath and told himself that he could not fear the future. He had done what he could, all he could, and now he had reached the limit of his rope. Whatever he did in the future, he would have to use a different tactic.

Probably a good thing. You know you would be bored if you did one thing for too long, and your enemies would have a chance to get used to you and predict your motions.

The wolf abruptly uncurled and sprang to its feet, taking a step nearer to the desk, looking up at him. Rufus nodded at it, and let the Ritual of Cinnatus go, laying down his control of all magic in the Ministry.

He felt the wards uncoil and unbind within his head like the cracks of whips parting. He felt his familiarity with various spells drain until he was back to being what he had been, an ordinary wizard who knew the spells as they formed and sparked within his own body, and nothing more. He felt the Ministry breathe a sigh of relief that faded halfway through. That sigh was no longer his to hear.

The wolf swelled with power as it stood there, the living embodiment of the ritual, the mold the magic had chosen to pour itself into. It looked at him with blue eyes, so contained and confined that it was sentient in those moments, and if magic could bless, Rufus would have sworn it blessed him.

He had let the ritual go before he strictly needed to. He had not forced it to demand the magic from him, and he certainly had not forced it to kill him or his companions.

The wolf turned and bounded into the walls, its personality dissipating as it went, the magic racing back into freedom. Rufus sat back and sipped at his cup of tea, and wondered when others would notice.

And if he had the time to have a bit of fun before they did.

[illegible]

Harry took his broom up from the Quidditch Pitch into a singing wind. The day was not that fair, with heavy hanging clouds that would probably scatter rain down later, but the sun lent a golden undertone to the air, and Harry could admire the deep, damp contrast between gray and green, still stubbornly lingering in the Forbidden Forest.

Besides, he thought better in flight than he did on the ground.

He took the Firebolt up to three hundred feet, and settled into a lazy circle, a bit wider than the Pitch. He stared down, and for a moment his imagination was filled with memories of the times he'd plucked the Snitch here, the time in his third year when Sirius had tried to kill him, the time in second year when a Bludger had broken his arm, the time in first year when the Lestranges had come onto the Pitch and Harry had had to battle them while throwing the game for Connor—

He snorted and shook his head. I didn't come here to brood about the past. That's one thing I'm free not to do anymore, think nonstop about the past.

He turned so that he was lying on his back along the broom, swinging one foot to stir it in the air. He supposed he shouldn't do that, that someone else would believe it dangerous, but for once he didn't care.

He had to think.

Harry closed his eyes and considered the ramifications of what he'd told Draco and Snape. Dissolve the monitoring board, and he might as well break all his agreements with the Light wizards. How could they trust him again? Why should they have reason to? And Madam Whitestag, who was, at the very least, a canny leader and capable of

uniting people who would ordinarily have scattered in a dozen directions—who had managed to forgive Harry enough for the death of her children to try and work with him—would be offended beyond recapture.

No matter what Snape and Draco thought, simply dissolving the monitoring board was not an option.

Harry gave a short little nod of his head. So what were the choices, then? And how was he going to make them?

One came to him almost immediately. Madam Marchbanks would not act against him, and she was clearly and closely allied to the Light—Declared for it, in fact, which Aurora was not. She could lead the monitoring board in Aurora's place. Aurora could work with her in the capacity that she had already said she would, sending instructions and book on Light pureblood rituals to Harry, but Harry would ask her to step down from leading the board.

When she asked why, he would explain the truth, that he had realized she had set her running dogs on his allies, and he could not trust someone who did that.

And what will she do then?

Harry opened his eyes and stared at the lazy stripes of cloud directly above him. He wanted to dive frantically away from them towards the ground, and use up the excess energy that thrummed through him, but he forced himself to be still and consider what he knew of Aurora.

Strong-willed. A leader. Both of those things would make her unhappy when working with the monitoring board in any diminished capacity from the one she played now.

On the other hand, she was also careful, and clever, and could look past the idea of revenge for her dead children enough to approach Harry as a political opponent, not a personal enemy. And despite the outrage Snape and Draco showed over the way she'd handled him, Harry did not really believe they would have encouraged him to

approach Aurora any other way, if they had been on a board in charge of supervising her.

She was far more likely to blink at him when he announced that he wanted Madam Marchbanks to take over the board, curse the luck that had caught her out, and then work with him again. Harry hardly expected her to stop trying to step around and trick him. This time, though, he would be watching for that. He would incorporate the plans of hers he could into his own plans, and stop others.

He had gone into the meeting today stupidly trusting. But it would be equally stupid to be so distrustful that he lost the chance of converting Aurora altogether. For whatever reason, the more of himself he showed to the people around him, the more he did for them, the more they tended to like him and respond in turn. Harry did not pretend to understand it, but he had seen how Snape had changed when Harry started Occlumency training with him, and when Snape had shared his mind while he rebuilt it after Sylarana's death. Hawthorn had told him the story of how Harry's simple offer to brew her Wolfsbane had changed her life after she was bitten by Greyback and given her back her strength—and something similar had happened to her recently, if the way she thanked him when he came back from riding the dragon was any indication. Adalrico had grown comfortable enough with him to tell him the tale of torturing and raping Alba Starrise. Harry might not know the exact nature of the gift he seemed to have for reaching out, but he would be stupid to discount it.

And I have enough enemies, he thought, thinking of Lucius, thinking of the Unspeakables, thinking of Philip Willoughby and those other parents of the Dozen Who Died who would not be contented with this compromise, thinking of Falco, thinking of Voldemort. Aurora may become one of them permanently, but first, I want to approach her and see if I can't convince her to support me.

Harry gave a smile he knew was faint. But, in truth, if he had to do something other than just ask Aurora to give up tactics that would threaten the alliance between them—and he doubted she would give them up, even if she said she would—he preferred this form of manipulation. Let her see him for who he was. Harry had rarely attempted to hide that, and it went badly when he did. He could hold

secrets. He could lie by omission. But he could not say he was not vates, not at this point in time, and he could not pretend that he did not value the free wills and decisions of others. He did.

Now, of course, there was the problem of what to do about Draco and Snape, who would explode when they heard of this.

Harry sighed, clenched his hand around the broom handle, and swung himself off, turning around so that he gripped it with his knees and hung moodily upside-down. That sent blood rushing to his head, but it was such a perfect expression of his emotions that he didn't think he could resist.

Nothing I can do but tell them truth, and explain my reasoning, and give them a chance to respond. Explanations are fine. Protests are fine.

But sooner or later, I have to make my own mistakes. I should have been the one to sense what Aurora was doing today. I'm a Legilimens, too, and if my stupidity prevented me from using that, or ferreting out her tactics from watching her, then that's my own fault. Draco would hate it if I tried to protect him from every mistake, and sending Snape to Joseph meant nothing until Snape decided to heal on his own.

I've healed so much in concert with them, and benefited so much from their help, and it would be ingratitude personified to abandon them now. But acting on my own, trying to learn what I can when I don't have someone to watch my back, is not a bad thing, either. I've had to do that with Rosier, and in Voldemort's mind, and in the Forbidden Forest, and on Acies's back. If my healing is going to function on more than one level, if I'm going to live simultaneously, then I need to heal both with Draco and Snape and apart from them.

He disliked the conclusions that immediately jumped into his mind from that. If he were going to be honest with himself, that would mean that he had to work on healing his wrist and talking with Joseph, too, and he would have to do it not just when Draco and Snape asked but of his own free will.

Don't want to, he whined to himself. I could still do without a left hand. I could still do without talking about Kieran's death. They just aren't as important as other things. He could list at least ten things more important than either of them without trying.

But he had to. And if sometimes he resented it and whined to himself in his head, at least the resentment and the whining would stay in his head. Snape and Draco should no more have to bear everything with him than they should have to help him heal in everything, or spot and guard against his every mistake.

His head pounded rather with blood, so Harry swung himself back onto his broom and ascended at a steep angle. He flew upward until the heartbeat in his ears sounded normal again, then flipped over and dropped straight towards the ground.

His muscles stretched, and his ears went from chilled to warm in a series of uncomfortable moments, and the Pitch drew nearer until it seemed to fill the entire world. Harry pulled up a moment after that, his arms straining, and zipped in a circle backwards.

He flew that way until most of his uncertainties had changed into something else, into careful, rueful determination to walk forward. Sometimes he would have given much to be as certain as Draco and Snape were, whether that was on the right political course or on what a Lord-level wizard deserved.

But certainty isn't always for me, I suppose. And that's all right.

He arched his back until it cracked, then landed and made his way to the Quidditch shed to put the Firebolt away.

[illegible]

Connor grinned when he saw his brother wandering away from the Pitch. Harry had obviously been out flying, probably thinking about Quidditch and wishing that he could have played today. Well, Connor would be more than happy to tell him how the game went—unless, of course, Harry had another place to hurry off to and be.

Connor tried to stifle a flare of resentment as he called his brother's name. Harry looked up and saw him. He grinned and waved with his hand.

He's always so busy. The moments when he has time for me are so rare.

But against that, Connor could set twelve years when Harry had had no time for almost anything or anyone but him. He told the flare of resentment to shut up and go away, and then he had reached Harry and they were turning around for a moment in an effort to adjust themselves so that they walked side by side instead of in opposite directions.

Harry laughed as they figured it out, and then said, "So, how much did Gryffindor defeat Slytherin by?"

Connor arranged his face into a careful expression of neutrality. "Oh, not that much," he said. "You still have a chance of taking the Quidditch Cup, especially if you utterly trounce Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. And there's a new Seeker on Ravenclaw that's really quite good, and by the time I play him he'll have had a chance to get better and better, so I might not defeat him at all."

"Out with it," said Harry mildly.

He had tried to respect Harry's feelings as a Slytherin, he really had, Connor thought, but he simply couldn't resist bursting into laughter. "It was six hundred and twenty points to one hundred," he admitted. "I'm sorry, Harry. I don't think you have a chance of taking the Quidditch Cup at all."

"If you beat us by more than five hundred points, we don't bloody deserve it," said Harry, his voice thrumming with indignation. "Where was Sam looking for the Snitch? Up his own arse?"

"Actually, it was the Keeper's fault, mostly," Connor offered. "He just can't keep his own goal covered, Harry. Meanwhile, Ron flew like Merlin had touched him, and I don't think Slytherin knew what hit

them there. They were used to thinking of Ron as the weak point of the team, because he was, the last time you played us.” Connor snickered, remembering the expression on the Slytherin Beaters’ faces when they started trying to direct the Bludgers to hit Ron, and he had managed to avoid them every single time. “They don’t realize that’s changed.”

“We deserved to lose,” said Harry, voice firm now. He paused a long moment, and Connor wondered what would come next. He didn’t think it could diminish his joy, whatever it was. There was a raucous party going on in Gryffindor Tower. They had won for more reasons than just Harry not being on the Slytherin team, and they all knew it. They had worked well together. Connor could barely remember the game, in fact, except for scattered moments. The Gryffindor team had fallen so smoothly into a whole that it was more an impression of silent communication, wheeling flight, and always, always knowing where a teammate was and what would happen next.

“Connor,” Harry said at last.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think—“ Harry scratched the back of his neck. “I’m not just saying this because of your argument with Parvati, or because I think she’s right about me and Draco all the time, or anything like that. But I’d like to spend more time with you. I really would. A Seeker’s game. A day when we go to Hogsmeade together and talk about stupid things. Could I?”

Connor didn’t know what to say for a moment. He felt joy welling to the surface of his chest, to burst out his throat. When it came, he wasn’t sure if it would be a laugh or a happy shout. It turned out rather like a mixture of the two, and apparently it rather startled Harry, as did the hug Connor grabbed him in a moment later.

“Of course, you prat,” he muttered into his ear. “And this doesn’t have to have anything to do with Parvati, or Draco. We’re brothers, Harry.”

If I can't be safe with my magic within Hogwarts's wards, then I'm not safe anywhere, Draco, and certainly not in bed in your arms.

And there was always the chance that Harry would not be safe, no matter who accompanied him, no matter what happened, no matter who pointed out the threats to him. He had already had to go into danger numerous times, even when he knew it was dangerous. And then there were his opponents. If the Light wizards were stupid and stubborn enough to demand a monitoring board in the first place, then Snape could not discount Harry's fear that they would be stupid and stubborn enough to revoke their other promises if the monitoring board was dissolved.

I said that I would try to let him go, to fail and make mistakes. He will not crumble this time as he did when he battled his mother. I do not believe that Aurora Whitestag can harm him without his active cooperation. She had that today. Do I really believe that she will have it again?

No, Snape had to think. He'd watched Harry's eyes when he admitted using Legilimency, and behind the resentment that that had happened at all was a stronger resentment towards Whitestag for making such tactics necessary. Now he knew. Now he was warned.

Now Snape himself was warned, and would not have to do such piecemeal Legilimency again, so he could better respond to attempts at distraction like Shadow's.

And then there was Draco.

"Why could Mrs. Addlington bait you so easily?" he asked Draco abruptly.

Draco started. Then he looked at Snape as if he were mad and answered, "Because they so obviously wanted only to hurt Harry. Everyone but my mother and his other allies, of course," he added dismissively. "And then she was making remarks about purebloods and the Grand Unified Theory, and I knew Harry wouldn't say anything against her, since he accepts that load of rubbish. How

could I let her remarks go by, and let her think that everyone in the room agreed with her?”

“It is not impossible that others did not want to hurt Harry,” said Snape, watching him closely. Draco had his own frustrations, that was clear, but he had let them build up to an unacceptable level today. Snape considered his own reaction to Shadow’s provocation to be unacceptable, and Draco’s response to Addlington had been far worse. “Madam Marchbanks, for example.”

“She’s Light.”

Snape snorted in spite of himself, hardly able to believe what he was saying. “That does not make her evil.”

Draco sprang to his feet and began pacing, then. “The monitoring board needs to be dissolved,” he said, in a low, passionate voice. “I’ll say that as many times as I need to. I’ll do whatever I have to to make Harry see that. It’s impossible that he doesn’t see it. He needs freedom to act on his own.”

Snape cocked his head. “Is this more about ending a danger to Harry, Draco, or winning an argument with him?”

Oh, that earned him a glare. But Draco was not Lucius, and that glare did not bring back enough memories to disconcert Snape. Snape continued, easily able to play the role of Head of House in this environment. “I think that you may wish to step back and consider your own actions before you consider his. You would not wish to be a liability to Harry, Draco.”

“I am not—“

“As you were not today?”

Draco folded his arms and turned away.

Snape rolled his eyes and wondered silently why he was always the one who needed to speak such obvious truths. “Think of yourself, Draco,” he said. “Study your own emotions and reactions as you are

encouraging Harry to study his.” He paused, noting the tense set of Draco’s shoulders, and added softly, “Harry will not hate you if you Declare for Dark.”

Draco whipped around so fast that he stumbled. Snape saw his face flush in humiliation as he steadied himself. “How did you know?” he whispered.

A lucky guess, combined with Legilimency. But Draco did not need to know that. “Because you are growing more and more entrenched in your sentiments towards the Light,” Snape said. “Because you are once again seeking to define yourself, and you cannot do that solely as Harry’s lover and partner. Because you are a Dark wizard, Draco, with an affinity for those spells, with that deep distrust of the opposite allegiance, and with a love for tactics that Harry will avoid using if possible. Tell him that you are Declaring, and he will understand.”

“I thought—I should remain undeclared...”

“That is Harry’s path,” said Snape. “It is not the path for many other wizards. And he will not hate you if you do this.”

Draco nibbled his lip and stared at the floor. He had not expected his own defining moment to come at such a time, Snape guessed. But it was here, and he had to meet it, rather than continue denying it and driving himself into misguided attempts to live vicariously through Harry. That only made him act as he had today. Some said that Light and Dark called to the souls of those wizards suited to them. Snape doubted that, but if it could be true, then the Dark was calling Draco. And Midwinter would be here soon, the greatest time of power of the wild Dark. Its voice would resound more clearly now.

“I should,” Draco whispered. “He would want me to do what most pleases me, not what most pleases or benefits him.”

Snape nodded, and said nothing more. Draco had made the decision. He would urge himself along the path now.

A knock sounded on the door, and Harry stepped inside without waiting for an answer or an invitation. Snape's eyebrows rose when he saw the determination written on his face.

Well. It seems that this conversation shall be interesting, indeed.

He sat forward to meet it.

Chapter Forty-Nine: A Matter of Equality

Harry was gratified to see that Snape looked at him as if actually eager for the conversation to resume, though he was concerned about Draco's flushed face and loosely clasped hands. Well, whatever the matter is, he must speak to me about it. I'm unable to guess what he holds back and hides, most of the time.

"I've thought about what you said," he admitted. "I still don't think I can dissolve the monitoring board. But I will ask Mrs. Whitestag to step down and let Madam Marchbanks take her place. And I do intend to tell Mrs. Whitestag why." He held up his hand as Snape's mouth opened, in a silent plea to let him finish. Remarkably, Snape shut his mouth and did so. "I think I can understand her. What she wants is power over me. Being sent away from me won't help that. On the other hand, remaining near me means a chance to turn her towards me as I've managed to turn other people—simply by showing her what I stand for, and what I intend to do to accomplish my goals. I expect her to apologize for her wrongdoing and use more subtle versions of the tactics she already tried. Now, I'll be watching for them, and it will be no more difficult than other political waltzes I've danced in the past."

Snape raised his eyebrows, but waited for an extra moment, as if to make sure that Harry were finished. Harry nodded. Snape said, "And do you believe that you can convince Madam Marchbanks to take up the post?"

"Yes," said Harry. "She wasn't happy with what happened today. And you said she isn't against me. And she is clearly Declared for Light, so no one can say I'm dismissing Mrs. Whitestag only to put one of my Dark allies in her place."

Snape nodded slowly. Harry glanced at Draco. "What do you think?" he asked.

Draco rubbed his hands together for a moment. "I suppose you can't get rid of the monitoring board yet," he admitted. "I didn't think about the larger political picture." Harry bit his tongue to keep from saying that Draco often didn't think about the larger political picture. "But I

think setting some definite limits would be helpful. Do they expect to supervise you for a few months? Until you're legally of age? Until they agree that you won't do anything else irresponsible?" Draco snorted at that, and muttered something about Harry's never convincing the monitoring board of that, if he hadn't been able to convince Draco and Snape.

"Not a bad idea," said Harry, surprised. What conclusions did he come to while I was gone? "And I can ask Madam Marchbanks about that more easily than I can Mrs. Whitestag. She would probably find some way to slip out of answering."

It was obvious that Draco was still distracted, still thinking of whatever had occupied him while Harry was gone more than he was thinking of Harry's answer. Harry waited, and waited, and waited, and still no answer was forthcoming, only the nervous washing of Draco's hands. Harry looked to Snape, only to receive a scowl and a jerk of his head at Draco, as much to say that the tale was his partner's to tell. Harry stood and waited as patiently as he could.

"Harry," Draco said at last. "Would you mind if I Declared for Dark?"

"I—" Harry had to think about that for a moment, but in the end there was only one thing he could say. "Of course not, Draco," he said. "Is Midwinter calling you?"

Draco winced. "I don't like the thought of that," he said, as if Snape were no longer in the room; the tone was one Harry had only heard from him in private before. "That I would be Declaring to the same form of the wild Dark that killed Fawkes and tried to make you into a Lord."

"The wild Dark was irritated then," said Harry, and forced himself forward through a blur and haze of phoenix fire in his memories. "And you can't help the time of year when you feel the call, Draco. It's a very rare and special thing to feel at all." He reached out and gently ran his hand up and down Draco's arm. "I will never mind that you have Declared, and especially not your allegiance."

Draco nodded, mute. Harry studied him for a moment, then made an educated guess that he would swear did not depend on Legilimency. "Is this part of the reason that you were so rude to Mrs. Addlington during the meeting? That you were occupied with thinking about the wild Dark, and what it would mean if you swore yourself to it?"

A second nod. Harry gathered Draco into his arms, feeling the same surge of intense protectiveness that he knew Draco had felt for him more than once. "You don't need to keep such concerns to yourself," he whispered into Draco's ear. "You would yell at me if I did. I'm not going to yell at you—" he smoothed his hand up and down Draco's spine, the better to calm him "—but I do want to know about them sooner than this in the future."

Draco gave a little sigh and relaxed against him. Harry went on smoothing, and glanced over at Snape. His guardian's gaze was sharp, piercing, as much to ask why Harry himself wouldn't accept that kind of comfort more often, but he nodded, as if approving of his tactics with Draco.

Harry eased Draco back onto the couch. He found that his arms didn't want to leave him, but he kept them on Draco's spine and shoulders. Moving them lower would spark unfortunate thoughts, and he already had enough trouble with those since the barriers on his hormones broke during the Halloween ritual. He had no idea how Draco, or for that matter other sixteen-year-old boys, coped with being flooded with thoughts of sex all the time.

"And are we coming with you to the next meeting of the monitoring board?" Snape asked the question as if it needed to be addressed right now.

Draco abruptly stiffened against Harry, and then pulled away and turned to look at him. Harry frowned. He knew Draco didn't have Occlumency training, and so there was no reason that he should be able to bury his emotions that well and that suddenly. That could only mean that he considered Harry's answer more important right now than his crisis about Declaring.

Harry couldn't look them both in the eye while he replied, so he settled for Draco. "No, you're not."

Draco drew his lips back, showing his teeth, and said nothing at all.

"Explain," said Snape.

Harry reminded himself not to sound defensive. He had made this choice for perfectly good reasons. Just because he hadn't known Draco was so twisted up around the notion of Declaring, and just because he still didn't know why Snape appeared to be taking this so well, didn't mean that his choice was invalid. "Because I want to go alone," he said. "Because I promised Mrs. Whitestag that you wouldn't be there, and showing up with both of you along would warn her at once that something was wrong, and give her time to prepare her defenses before I tell her the truth. Because, sometimes, I need to make my own mistakes, and that includes mistakes on the battlefield of politics. I want to see what tactics and enemies I can recognize without someone there to watch my back."

Snape studied him broodingly when Harry looked again, his eyes dark with what Harry could only imagine were memories. Then he nodded as if those memories had been the things to convince him of Harry's validity.

"I think this is a mistake," he said. "I think you will fall badly without us." That made Harry bristle in spite of his resolve to hold calm, but Snape didn't give him the chance to show off his anger. "But it is a mistake that you need to make. If we force you to rely on us, then you will grow cramped. We have made you see the need to heal, and helped you heal. Now is the time that you began to step into healing that does not include us."

"I know that, sir," said Harry, touched beyond measure. What did he think to turn him in this direction? He might have been inside my head with me while I was riding my broom. "I already know that I'll need to speak to Joseph on my own, and work on breaking the curses on my hand on my own. That is, I can have help from Argutus and others, but the will to guide me through them has to be my own."

“Where did you go to think?” Draco asked, curiosity apparently overcoming his urge to remain coldly silent.

“Up on my broom.” Harry gave him a faint smile. “I think best when I’m away from the ground. And—well.” He shrugged. “I do have to make mistakes on my own. I’m nearly an adult, and I can’t remember a time when I lived truly free of the domination of at least one other mind. First it was my mother, and Connor when she wasn’t with me. And then it was Tom Riddle. And then it was the influence of those I couldn’t abandon, like my father, and those I didn’t want to abandon, both you and Professor Snape—”

He stopped when he saw Snape’s expression, touched with just a hint of rebuke. He took a deep breath and made himself say it. “Both you and Severus.” He countered the feeling that he was being informal and deserved a punishment for violating such boundaries with the reminder that Snape had wanted Harry to call him by his first name. “And all of this has been wonderful, but it’s still made my life far too simple. There’s always someone to blame for a mistake, or someone to trust when I should be relying on myself, or someone who makes me see that I need to peel back another layer of my training. Always someone to be my hands, my eyes, my ears. That started to change last year, but it didn’t go far enough, or something like today could never have happened. I should have been intelligent enough to see the meeting of the monitoring board for what it was, the way I should have been intelligent enough to recover from my grief over the Dozen Who Died, and the way I should have seen that the Sanctuary was my best option.” He nodded to Snape and then to Draco. “So far, my mistakes have mostly been mistakes of omission. I want to change them to mistakes of commission, if only as practice for the war.”

“Commendable, Harry.” Snape’s voice was soft, and full of a strange sound. Harry could only compare it to waves breaking on rocks, because he didn’t think he’d ever heard an emotion like it before. And then he looked at Snape and saw that his eyes were shining with pride, the kind of pride that Narcissa might have in Draco when he did something particularly fine.

away from us at Walpurgis, and it's the Dark that Voldemort tried to chain, and it's the Dark that danced around me when I went to my first Walpurgis, and took me into it, and broke me apart, and put me back together. It's too large to be just one thing. Of course I'm not going to be upset if you Declare for it, Draco, any more than I was at Connor Declaring for Light."

Draco didn't think he could relax if Harry was going to compare him to his brother. He managed to wrestle up on one elbow, only to drive Harry's fingers into an unexpectedly tender place on his shoulder with the movement. He threw back his head, gasping, and Harry leaned down and captured his lips in a kiss.

The angle was awkward, and made Draco's neck ache. He found that he didn't care. He turned over, looping his arms around Harry's shoulders and dragging him down to him. Harry hummed under his breath, but then reared up and managed to make it a sound of protest.

"Draco, don't you—"

"Not right now," Draco murmured.

Harry nodded, and then slid away from him before Draco could make him stay in one place and kiss him. Draco felt a warm hand on his hip, and then Harry muttered again, not his name this time, and his trousers and pants vanished.

And then Harry's mouth was surrounding him, and Draco gasped, because this wasn't like the wild, intense coupling they had shared on the Halloween ritual. This was fuzzier, and made his eyes blur, and mingled with the steady call he had been hearing on the edge of his perceptions for a month now, and had tried to deny was the wild Dark each time.

When he closed his eyes, the call billowed around him like a storm, sweeping him up into high, shining cold, while at the same time the sweetness and warmth of Harry's mouth kept him anchored to the earth below. Draco's back melted, and he seemed to have wings. But he also definitely had a body that was not melting, but growing harder and harder, both in terms of his erection and in terms of the

movements he was making. He had no idea how Harry was handling it, because, once again, he seemed to have no idea where his hands were, where the rest of his body was—

The call sounded in his head like a thunderclap at the same moment he came. Draco sagged back against the pillows, exhausted, and knew his decision was made. Harry gently drew back. Draco heard more spells, all of them quiet enough not to disturb him; they cleaned him up, and Vanished his shirt, and settled him under the covers. Harry's hand brushed through his hair, and Draco turned his head so that he could kiss the palm.

"I'm going to Declare," he whispered.

“On Midwinter?” Harry’s voice matched his for quietude, as if they would disturb something sacred by speaking of the Declaring ritual any more loudly.

“Yes,” Draco said, because he wasn’t sure his head would move if he tried to nod. “And Harry, I love you.”

“That, I knew.” Harry’s lips brushed along his cheek like his hand, and then Draco found himself spilling into the first genuinely unbroken sleep he’d had in more than a week. He had nothing to feel sorry for, and Declaring would satisfy the needs of his soul without changing his relationship with Harry.

[illegible]

Harry leaned on the wall of the dungeon corridor and shivered. He knew he had to do this. He couldn't have half of honesty and not the other half. He couldn't bask in the approving looks from Draco and Snape if he only had words and not actions to inspire them.

But he didn't want to do this. The reluctance was so strong that he almost turned back in the direction of the Slytherin common room. Harry was sure that Draco would still be sleeping, and he could join him. He imagined slipping under the covers and sliding his arms

around his boyfriend, the warmth of his body, the softness and scent of his hair—

And then he reminded himself that he was standing in the middle of an open hallway, and let the thoughts subside, and knocked firmly on the door in front of him.

Joseph opened it a moment later. He paused when he saw Harry, and studied him carefully. Harry tossed his head like a nervous horse—he couldn't quite help the gesture—but returned the gaze, and then Joseph nodded, as if either the gesture or the gaze had helped him decide.

"You're ready to talk now, Harry," he said, and opened the door further. "Come inside."

Harry did. Joseph's quarters were not as finely decorated as Vera's had been when she stayed in Hogwarts, but of course she had not stayed in the dungeons, either. Joseph had hung his maps on the walls with charms to protect them from the damp stone. Under and beneath and over them hung banners that Harry hadn't seen before. He squinted, but couldn't make anything of the symbols on them. Now and then he thought he saw something that looked like the crest of a Hogwarts House, but he doubted it was, and the next moment the familiar figure had blended back into a sea of chaos.

"Here we are." Joseph nodded, and Harry turned away from the confusion of the walls to see that a table stood in the center of the room, with a chair on either side of it. Harry took the one nearest the door, and Joseph smiled faintly at him and took the other. He leaned forward, eyes intent. "Suppose that we start with you telling me what you would like to talk about, Harry."

"I reckon we should begin with Kieran's death," said Harry reluctantly. "If only because you seemed concerned over it, and I don't understand why you were."

Joseph leaned back in his chair. "What would you say if someone else told you he'd been suicidal, Harry, if only for a few moments?"

Harry swallowed. "I would be concerned about him."

"And?"

"I'm not like everyone else." Harry clenched his hand in front of him, feeling shards of emotion poke at him like broken bones. At that moment, he really did wish the Breaking of Boundaries ritual had repaired all the walls it ripped down. "And it really was only a few moments," he added. "I wouldn't commit suicide unless—" Damn. He hadn't meant to say that last word.

Joseph raised his eyebrows, and said absolutely nothing.

Harry looked aside. "Unless I caused the world more trouble alive than dead," he said softly. "There might come a time when it's necessary. I've always known that. If Voldemort made me into a weapon somehow, if he managed to possess me, or if I went mad and became a Dark Lord, then I would want to be dead. I wouldn't want to give my friends the burden and grief of dealing with me."

"Why would you have killed yourself when Kieran died?" Joseph asked.

That question I can answer. "I made a promise to protect him," Harry said simply. "I know now that nothing could have kept him away from Loki, not once Loki invoked that vengeance ritual, but I didn't know that then. I should have made wards or spells or preparations of some kind that would defend him. The same thing happened when the children in the Life-Web died. There should have been some way for me to save them."

"Some things are impossible," Joseph said. "Do you realize that, Harry?" He sounded slightly bemused. Harry supposed it wasn't something he had to explain to most people he talked to.

"And I'm supposed to be the answer to impossibilities," Harry snapped. "I'm supposed to be able to do things that other people can't. That's what having Lord-level power means. Instead of casting Dark spells that torture people or manipulate them into doing what I want, I happen to prefer saving and healing. And people become

used to thinking of me as able to do any healing and saving that needs to be done. So when I do run up against something I can't change, I start aching."

"Suicide is still a rather extreme response to that kind of failure," Joseph noted. "Especially since it would prevent you from saving or healing anyone else in the future."

Harry hissed in spite of himself, and wished he had ears to lay back. Lingerinɡ poison from the dreams of Voldemort, my arse. My Animagus form is a lynx, and the sooner Peter accepts that, the better and faster he can train me. "I know it is," he said.

"Harry?"

He folded his arms and scowled at the floor.

"Harry?"

"I don't—I don't want to be the kind of person who doesn't keep his promises," Harry said to the floor. "I don't want to be the kind of person who hurts his friends. I don't want to be the kind of person who wounds the world the way that Voldemort does, the way that Dumbledore did."

"And?"

"To avoid becoming that kind of person—if I thought there was no way I could benefit anyone by remaining alive, but would only hurt them—then I would kill myself, yes." Harry raised his head and stared at Joseph. "That's the way I am. And I know that you're probably going to say suicide is a selfish act, but I'm talking about extremes, rather like the situation with Kieran or the Life-Web. No, I'm speaking about something even more extreme than they are, because I could still benefit Draco and Snape, if no one else, by remaining alive then. If there ever comes a point where it would be more selfish to live than to die, then of course I'm going to die."

Joseph sat in silence for long enough that Harry began to hope he didn't know how to deal with this, and would let him go for right now.

He hadn't put his conviction in quite those words before, but of course it was true. How could it not be? He might set safeguards on himself, like the monitoring board; he might have people who loved him for himself, like Draco and Snape. He was much more healed than he had been five years ago. He knew what love for people besides Connor was. He knew that what his parents had done to him was abuse.

But he still did not know how to value his life simply because it was life. Harry was hoping fervently now that it was the kind of knowledge he would never learn. What mattered was how he lived, not that he lived. In the end, when all the other guards were gone, the final judge of his impact on the world had to be himself. And if he did nothing but scar it, how could he justify staying alive?

"And for others?" Joseph asked.

"I don't know what you mean," Harry said pleasantly.

"If you thought your brother was only scarring the world by remaining alive," Joseph said, "would you tell him to kill himself?"

"Of course not," said Harry, recoiling at the thought. "I don't think he ever could arrive at that point. Besides, even if he did consider suicide, he would have to make the decision on his own. I couldn't interfere with his free will like that."

Joseph stared at him in silence a moment longer. Then he said, "You have most unusual views on life and death, Harry."

"But that's a good thing, right?" Harry persisted. "If suicide is a fundamentally selfish decision, then it's good that I'm showing some selfishness, isn't it?"

Joseph put his head in his arms and sighed. Harry watched him, a bit irritated. It seemed that when he did arrive at and believe in whatever conclusions they wanted to foist on him, there was always another set of them waiting just beyond, and then they were angry because Harry didn't believe in them yet.

At last, Joseph said, "And if your Malfoy considered suicide?"

Harry flinched.

“You don’t want him to, do you?” Joseph leaned forward. “And yet you can sit here and tell me that you would judge your life as if it were a toll exacted on or paid to the world, and if you found it only exacted, you would cut it short.” His voice simmered with a passion that Harry didn’t understand.

Harry swallowed a few times. Then he said, “Yes, it would hurt. Merlin, it would hurt.” The mere thought of Draco with his wand aimed at himself, or a knife in his hand, made Harry’s skin crawl up his spine trying to get away. “But it would still be his decision. I would argue with him if I thought he was under the Imperius Curse or otherwise influenced from the outside, and I would need loads of proof that he wasn’t. If it were under his own free will, then I would have to stand aside. I would have to. I would hate it, but I would have to.”

Surprisingly, Joseph smiled. “At least, there, you do see yourself and others in the same light,” he murmured. Then he leaned forward again. “And now I wanted to ask you about what you think might make your life worth living, beyond the pleasure that you receive from helping and healing others.”

Harry sighed. "This is going to be about how things taste again, isn't it?"

[illegible]

Harry waited patiently outside the castle for Connor to come back from Care of Magical Creatures. It was an unusually beautiful day for mid-November, the rush of clouds across the sky polishing it to the color of diamond, and the sun lingering as if reluctant to abandon the world, even though the clouds were racing to meet it. Harry could smell frost in the wind, and he wondered, absently, if the blessing Remus had spoken for him would soon come true after all, snow and pine needles.

He heard laughter on the edge of his perceptions, mad, exultant laughter. He ignored it. The wild Dark could call Draco all it wanted, and he was already preparing for the ritual that he would hold on Midwinter. But that didn't mean Harry had to listen to it. He told the laughter to go away.

In a few days, Harry thought, leaning back to breathe in the wind, it would be a year since his parents' trial. He shook his head. He could not even have imagined that he would feel this way a year later, after the broken mess he'd been then. But at the time, he didn't think he had really conceived of living beyond the few days in which the trial would take place. He had thought too much of rescuing James and Lily, and not enough of what would happen afterwards.

"Harry!"

There was his brother. Harry put the unhappy thoughts away, and rose to his feet with a smile. Then he raised his eyebrows, and wondered if not telling his brother that he wanted to play a Seekers' game with him was the best idea after all. Parvati trailed behind Connor, not exactly beside him, but close enough that Harry could entertain the idea of them having a conversation.

"Connor," he said, and nodded to Parvati. She looked at him with haunted eyes for a moment, then shook her head and walked past him into the castle. Harry forced himself to drop those thoughts, too, just like the broken memories of his parents' trial. In the past few days, he hoped, his Occlumency barriers had finally started to recover from Halloween. He would be grateful when they were back to full strength, and he could control his own mind in the way to which he'd become accustomed. "I thought we'd fly together, if you had no objection."

"Of course not." Connor grinned at him. "I can show you the move that won me the Snitch and the Gryffindor-Slytherin game."

"I can counter it," said Harry, feeling a rush of simple happiness that didn't have its origin, for once, in anything complicated he had done to help the world. His brother's grin brought back too many memories of flying together in Godric's Hollow. Harry had held himself back, yes, so that neither his parents nor his brother had ever guessed his true

skill on a broom, but that had become second nature by the time he was eight or nine, and then he had enjoyed the games by riding on top of his instincts, and having fun. He was curious to see if he could recapture the feeling now that it wouldn't have that quiet, simmering satisfaction of knowing he was obeying Lily underneath it.

“No, you can’t.” Connor rolled his eyes. “It’s a move that Ron and I developed, one you’ve never even heard of.”

“And Ron isn’t here right now,” Harry pointed out.

Connor narrowed his eyes then. "That doesn't matter. I'm going to defeat you anyway."

Harry snorted, and they made for the Quidditch shed, arguing on the way.

[illegible]

Connor was determined, this time. The game on Saturday had been wonderful, productive, brilliant. The Gryffindor team had never flown like that before, but they were already planning the next time they would fly like that.

But Connor would still have felt better about it if they had flown like that and beaten Harry at the same time. The Slytherin team without him had floundered so badly that there wasn't as much satisfaction in defeating them. As Harry had said, the Slytherins had lost so badly that they didn't really deserve the Quidditch Cup.

And now Harry had offered him the chance to show what he could really do, opposite his brother on a broom.

Connor picked up his own broom, the Nimbus, with a tingle of excitement that seemed to pass through his hands and communicate itself to the wood. He could hear Katie Bell's voice in his head if he listened, the lecture she'd given them during their last practice before the game proper.

“A lot of people will tell you that flying is like dueling, but they don't mean the same thing by it that I do. They mean it's a matter of life or death if you happen to fall off your broomstick or something else goes wrong in the air. But what it really should be like is that quickness and cleverness counts. A weaker wizard can win a duel with a stronger one because he thinks of a spell faster, or he uses a minor hex in a way that an opponent who only uses the Unforgivables would disdain. It's the same thing in Quidditch. Your opponent could have the better broom, and you could still win. In fact, I think we all know that's possible.”

Her glance had stabbed Connor. He'd done his best to stand straight and tall, and nod to Katie. They'd known by then, of course, that they wouldn't be playing Harry on Saturday, but Connor had also known that Katie thought him capable of beating his brother if he were playing. Harry's Firebolt shouldn't be allowed to make that much difference, and neither should his battle training. This was Quidditch, and Connor was good at Quidditch. There was no reason for him to lose just because Harry was the Seeker on the opposite team.

Harry had his broom in hand by now, and had faced the back of the shed. “Accio Snitch,” he murmured. Connor felt the twang of several unlocking spells undone, and then the Snitch came zipping through the darkness of the shed and floated around his head.

Connor snickered. “Should you have done that?” he asked.

“Oh, it'll give the monitoring board one more thing to yell at me about, and that will make them happy.” Harry shrugged and slung his leg over his Firebolt. “Come on.” He raced out the door of the Quidditch shed before Connor could respond, or even ask why the monitoring board should care about minor school infractions, the Snitch following him as if attached to a lead.

With a surge of determination, Connor hopped on the Nimbus and rode out the door, too, though he came perilously close to scraping a shoulder on the wood. But if Harry could do it, then he could. Will counted for a lot.

Yes, said an inconvenient voice from somewhere inside him. Will was what held Harry back when he could easily have defeated you in your games as children.

Connor told the inconvenient voice to shut up. Sometimes he thought like that, and it galled him. It reminded him too much of the way things had been. He wouldn't live like that again, mindlessly relying on Harry's fondness for him to let him win games or do anything else important. If he was going to defeat Harry, he was going to do it on his merits.

Harry was circling above the Pitch, waiting for him, when Connor made his way out of the shed. Harry nodded to him, and then released his hold on the Snitch. The tiny golden ball streaked away immediately, twinkling once before fading. Connor smiled. The cloudy nature of the day would make it harder for them to find it, since there was little sun to shine on it.

His brother lay along the Firebolt, his eyes scanning ahead. Connor started wheeling in the opposite direction, breathing deeply to send himself into the half-trance most useful for locating the Snitch. He tried to reach out, to think like it did, to put himself in its place, and know where he would go to evade the clumsy, grabbing hands of the waiting Seekers.

He lost track of what Harry was doing, but that didn't matter. What mattered was the sudden flash beneath him, and the way he began diving before the command to dive entered his head. Good, that was good. If he were going to defeat Harry on quickness alone, then he would have to think with his muscles, even before he thought with his brain.

A glimpse of movement from the side startled him and broke his trance. He jerked his head around to see Harry diving in a long, steep curve, flying with only his knees locked on the broom, his hand extended impatiently forward. The Snitch darted to the side at the last moment, and Harry cursed as it escaped.

I don't want to win just because he only has one hand, either, Connor thought, and called, even as he kept a desperate eye out for the

Snitch, “Do you want me to tie a hand behind my back, Harry, to make it a bit easier for you?”

Harry rolled his eyes at him as if that weren't worthy of an answer, and Connor supposed it really wasn't. He turned his glide into another circle, watching hawk-eyed, certain that he would spot the Snitch in a moment.

But he didn't, and moments turned into minutes, and minutes turned into what felt like a quarter of an hour or a half hour. Connor shivered as the wind cut through his clothes. They wore only ordinary robes, not Quidditch gear, other than the gloves. At the moment when they reached the Quidditch shed, it hadn't seemed possible to take the time to dress properly. Now, Connor was wishing that that had happened, much as he was wishing that the Snitch would appear.

Harry swooped past him, into a long, elegant wave of a dive that pointed him abruptly straight at the ground. Connor had one moment, just one, to decide if this was a feint designed to throw him off or the real thing.

He saw Harry's head, the way it was bent, and the way his neck muscles twitched, and the way his hand had already left the broomstick again, as though he could not bear to keep it flat, and thought, Real.

He followed hard on Harry's heels, but just beneath him, so that the Nimbus wasn't so much chasing the Firebolt as shadowing it. He snapped his head up and down like a bird searching for worms, hoping to see a streak of light out of the corner of one eye.

The wind shrieked in his ears, and then he saw the Snitch, doing a lazy spiral halfway between him and the ground. Connor let out a shriek of triumph. Harry's dive had been a feint after all, but it had led him in the right direction. He plummeted, chasing it.

Then he saw a shadow drift past him, and realized Harry had gone beneath the Snitch and was now rising to catch it.

Connor's heart pounded hard as he aimed from above while Harry aimed from below. Either of them could be foiled in a moment by the Snitch darting off to the side, but it hovered there as if waiting for them. He could feel the gold in his hand, and taste eagerness in his mouth. His fingers twitched. He was going to capture it. He would make this work. It would work. He was going to make this work.

He fell, yielding control of his broomstick entirely to the wind. The Snitch glowed, and didn't seem inclined to move. Connor's hand shot out, his fingers curved like claws.

And Harry swept past in a blaze of speed and took it away.

Connor cursed, and then had something else to curse about as the wind made the Nimbus buck, very nearly sending him into the Keeper's goal. He locked his legs desperately on the broom and turned sideways, into the wind, letting it bear him up and over, and then kicked out of it. The Nimbus spun twice, then righted itself. Connor sighed and turned to look at Harry.

He felt some of his resentment and desperation melt at the sight of his brother. Harry's mouth was open with laughter, his eyes bright with it. And he was waving the Snitch around as if it weren't just a Snitch, but the answer to defeating Voldemort. Connor thought he could give up a little satisfaction, for that.

"I beat you," Harry crowed across the distance between them, and Connor reconsidered.

"Luck," he said. "Not skill. And your broom is faster."

"Speed is skill, in Quidditch." Harry patted the Firebolt without letting go of the Snitch, then grinned at him. "Want another one?"

Abruptly, his head jerked to the side, and he frowned. Connor looked warily around the Pitch. When Harry looked like that, Death Eaters tended to appear out of nowhere. "What is it?" he asked.

"Someone just came onto the school grounds," Harry said distantly, staring at nothing Connor could see. "Someone powerful. Not

Voldemort, or I would have recognized him. Not Falco, either. But I don't see what other powerful wizard could—"

"Harry!"

Connor glanced down. He recognized the wizard standing at the edge of the Quidditch Pitch: Thomas Rhangnara. He waved and cupped his hands around his mouth. Connor couldn't tell if he was simply a naturally loud shouter, or if he had used some spell to enhance his voice, but Connor heard him as if he were up on a broom beside them.

"Jing-Xi is here," Rhangnara called. Connor looked at his brother, and wondered why Harry had turned pale at the name. "With the Headmistress's permission, of course. She would like to meet you."

Harry swallowed audibly, and called back, "Just a moment, Thomas!" He took his broom down in lazy loops that, while the preferred method for landing, were not what he normally used, being too slow. Connor caught up with him on the way down and snagged the Firebolt's bristles, making Harry look at him.

"Who is he talking about?" he asked.

Harry swallowed again. "Chinese Light Lady," he said. "One of the researchers who helped Thomas with the Grand Unified Theory. She said that she would be interested in meeting me. I just—I don't—I've never met someone with Lord-level power who wasn't trying to kill me or manipulate me before. I don't know if there's some special etiquette I'm supposed to use around her, or not." His hand scratched the back of his neck, and Connor had to catch the Snitch as it flew away.

"If she wants to criticize you, tell her to save the world first," said Connor firmly, and pushed his brother on the back. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"Jing-Xi wants to see you alone," Rhangnara called, answering that question.

Harry gave him a sickly smile, and then dived. Connor followed, wondering why he was so nervous. It wasn't as though Harry had known what laws and courtesies normally bound Lords and Ladies, and had mucked around actively violating them. No one had ever bothered to tell him what those laws and courtesies were.

And if she helped Rhangnara, surely she's reasonable.

[illegible]

Harry didn't know what to expect as he halted outside the room that had been Sirius's office during the years he helped with the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He could feel Jing-Xi's power beating beyond the door, but he wasn't close enough yet to tell just what it felt like—or even whether she might have barriers up to spare him some of the overwhelming effect or not. He didn't know what to say, what to do, what kind of etiquette might govern someone in a situation like this.

He forced himself to take a few deep breaths and push his emotions into the Occlumency pools. The barriers held. They would have to hold. He knocked on the door, and felt the power turn its attention towards him. Or, no, not the power, the mind. Harry wondered if perhaps that was normal. He felt his own magic and Voldemort's as something separate from them. Dumbledore's power, he hadn't felt often enough, and with Falco, both his magic and his mind were so inhuman that it was hard to comprehend them. But perhaps the magic was supposed to represent the Lord's or Lady's personality, rather than just a facet of that personality.

He had no idea.

“Come in,” said a pleasant voice with shades of several accents. Harry cautiously pushed the door open.

Jing-Xi was sitting on a chair in front of the fireplace, which she had Flooed through when she received McGonagall's permission to come to Hogwarts. She wore a garment half-gown and half-robe, of bright, pale green mixed with gold. Her hair was long and black and straight,

and drifted around her like waving tendrils in deep seawater. Her eyes were dark and bright, and fixed on him at once, expectantly.

But it was her magic that Harry was most interested in. He would have been able to tell she was Declared for Light with no previous warning, he thought. Her magic curled around him, nudging at him with lively curiosity, but showed no inclination to venture in where unwelcome. Now and then it formed into the image of a cat or a winged horse, shadows that foamed around Jing-Xi and collapsed in on themselves.

"Hello, Harry," Jing-Xi said.

Harry met her eyes uncertainly. His right shoulder sagged under a sudden weight, and he realized the bird had landed on him. He glanced at it and saw that it was swishing its lizard tail, scarlet eyes fixed on the Light Lady.

"Hello," he said, because it seemed polite, and the bird wasn't on the point of attacking her, anyway. "I'm sorry, but I don't know what kind of greetings I'm supposed to offer."

Jing-Xi rose. Harry was startled to realize how tall she was; she had seemed small in comparison to the puddle of her gown and her floating hair, but she stood nearly the height of Bill Weasley. She dipped her head to him in grave courtesy, then held out a hand. "Clasp my wrist," she instructed, when Harry continued to hover uncertainly. "Then allow your magic to flow over mine. That is the customary way of greeting among those of our power." Her eyes were still bright with something too gentle to be pity. "And it is not a surprise that no one ever taught you that, considering what I know of your history."

Harry felt his face heat up, but he could hardly deny that he had been abused, or that he had never encountered someone like Jing-Xi on equal grounds. He clasped her wrist, and tried to relax the barriers on his magic enough so that she could understand what he was like without drowning.

He realized, quickly, when the flow of her power came back to him, that she wasn't worried about drowning, and neither should he be. This sea of magic was entirely separate from his, and not just because it was Light. Jing-Xi didn't want to hurt or control him. Harry hadn't realized how much of a difference that would make. He felt as if he were gazing into a mirror of light and surging water, while a patient hand scribed words on the glass so that he could read them.

Jing-Xi didn't want to hurt him. She was interested in Harry's unique circumstances, including the age at which he'd come to his power and the fact that he was the magical heir of another Lord, which had happened before, but not very often. She wanted to know more about what he was like as vates, and she wanted to see Britain's one sane Lord, as she considered him, take a stable place in the magical community. Those last two were concerns anyone of Lord-level power might have had, but the first two were flavored with a delving, driving, focused version of Thomas's thirst for knowledge. She wanted to know because she wanted to see how those things mattered to Harry, not just because they might affect her in the future.

The communion ended, and Harry blinked and stepped back. He studied Jing-Xi's face, trying to figure out what she might have seen about him. Her eyes had gone wide; he didn't know if that should gratify him or not. She definitely didn't look bored, or as if the answers to her questions had been horrible.

"Sit down, please, Harry," she said, and resumed her own seat, settling herself with a shake of her head that sent her hair drifting in new directions. It didn't go very far, Harry noted; an invisible net seemed to scoop it up and bring it back close to her head. Jing-Xi saw him watching it, and smiled.

"You like this spell?" she asked. "I cannot claim credit for it, I fear. It was a gift from Stormgale."

"Stormgale?" Harry echoed blankly as he sat down on the other chair. She spoke as if he should know who that was, but though he now felt he knew Jing-Xi herself better, the name was still unfamiliar. And the way that Jing-Xi studied him now made him wonder if he had violated another unwritten rule. It took all his effort to sit still.

"Kanerva Stormgale," said Jing-Xi slowly. "The Dark Lady of Finland. I had assumed you knew her. It was partly her power you would have faced when you battled the wild Dark last Midwinter."

Harry shook his head, but not so much in denial of the acquaintance as in wonder. "Did she want to destroy the British Isles?"

"Yes," said Jing-Xi. "Actually." She gave a smile that looked half-sad to Harry. "It takes a special kind of Lady to give herself to the Dark and not lose her sanity completely," she murmured. "Stormgale's sanity did not survive the transition. She wishes for the wild Dark to destroy the world; she will help it along herself, but she does not actively take a part in harming others as Tom Riddle does. That might help somebody along the way, such as by gratifying the enemies of the people she killed. What she would rather do is gift the wild Dark with power and hope it can overcome the Light. Her specialty is winter, the wind and the ice and the storm, and someday she will go so deeply into them that she will never come back. She was very irritated when you defeated the wild Dark." Jing-Xi tapped a finger against her teeth, with an audible ringing sound that made Harry jump. "That could be why she's never contacted you, come to think of it. She and I have a friendship of sorts, but physical closeness to another Lord or Lady means nothing to her. What means something is finding somewhat of a kindred spirit. So far as I can tell, I am the only one she has ever sensed."

"Would I have to worry about her attacking the British Isles?" Harry asked anxiously. Just what I need, a mad Dark Lady on top of Falco and Voldemort.

"I don't believe so," said Jing-Xi calmly. "As I said, she is selfish. She has no sworn companions. She does not want to share her life with anyone except randomly and rarely. In her own way, she obeys the Pact."

"What Pact?" Harry could hear the capital letter, but he had no idea what Jing-Xi meant.

“The Pact among the Lords and Ladies in the world,” said Jing-Xi. “For the most part, Harry, we do not want war. We know that we could destroy too much of the world between us. The Dark Lords and Ladies don’t want that to happen because they would no longer have lands and people left to rule over, and the Light Lords and Ladies don’t want that to happen for the obvious reason. Voldemort is an exception. So was Grindelwald. And then of course there are the two Lords in Australia, but they confine their struggles to one another, and keep the Muggles from noticing anything all by themselves.” Jing-Xi shrugged. “So, though we kept an eye on Voldemort when he returned to Britain and announced himself twenty-six years ago, we did not do anything to interfere. His native opposition, the Light Lord Albus Dumbledore, must handle him, unless he actually extended his efforts at conquest into another international wizarding community.”

“He has, though,” said Harry, wondering what in the world the Pact would mean to him as vates. He was not about to refrain from trying to free a magical creature species simply because they lived in Africa or Asia instead of Britain, or, for that matter, if they lived in the rest of Europe. “He’s recruited Death Eaters from other countries.”

“That doesn’t answer the definition of conquest under the Pact,” said Jing-Xi. “He must actually have attacked wizards in those countries, provably—the Dark Lord himself, in this case, and not his Death Eaters or people who may have been acting on his orders.”

Harry nodded slowly. He didn’t entirely like the sound of that, but, presumably, their agreement had endured for so long because it worked. “And because I’m vates, and webs are melting now because of my presence in the world?” he asked. “How does that fit in under the Pact?”

“It doesn’t,” said Jing-Xi. “The Pact is only a few centuries old, and was made without a vates in mind. It has been much longer since someone came as far as you did, Harry, and then she fell to using compulsion.” For a moment, Jing-Xi closed her eyes, and shook her head. “I have read her diaries,” she murmured. “She did remarkable things. And then she tried too hard to demonstrate her control of magic, and grew more interested in that than in serving and freeing

others, and she was using compulsion inside a month. She Declared not long after.”

Harry shuddered a bit. “I will not let that happen to me,” he said.

Jing-Xi regarded him thoughtfully. “I see that you don’t want to let it happen to you,” she answered. “But, at the same time, you must understand that many of the Lords and Ladies aren’t happy with you, Harry.”

Harry snorted. “Well, you told me that I don’t fit under the Pact. But I had no idea what it was, either, or how to obey it.”

Jing-Xi leaned forward and squeezed his hand. “That’s why I’m here to help you,” she said. “You are unique—the magical heir of another Lord, a vates, the youngest Lord-level wizard in history, someone who refuses to Declare. The others don’t know what to make of you and would cause problems because of their uncertainty, or they would sit around dithering before they would move, or they wouldn’t move at all, like Stormgale. They are willing to leave the problems of reaching out to you up to me. And I don’t mind it, Harry,” she added, before Harry could open his mouth. “You are young. That is the reason for your ignorance, which you cannot help. Any mistakes that you have made so far are excusable, because of that. And because you are Lord-level, not a Lord, there are some things you will never do the same as the rest of us. I want to help you come to terms with the Pact—that is necessary, since the others would be sworn to rise against you if you refused to obey it and started freeing magical species in a country other than Britain—but also retain enough of what makes you yourself that you do not surrender what you are doing. What you are doing is necessary to the world.” She squeezed his hand. “I firmly believe that.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, my Lady—“

“Jing-Xi, please. We address each other by first names most of the time, Harry.”

Harry nodded. “How old were you when your power manifested?”

Jing-Xi laughed. The illusion of a wave broke over her head and then faded. "That is a hard question to answer, Harry. My magic simply never stopped growing. I should have been able to tell how strong I was at twenty, but not even my parents could answer that. And then I was stronger still at thirty, and a Lady-level witch at forty." She gave him a wistful smile. "My nearest neighbors are the Lords in Australia, and Stormgale, of course, contacts me only when she wishes to, and I rarely see my dearest friends, the Light Ladies who live in America and Mexico, thanks to their constant work. I would appreciate teaching you, if only to have a connection to, and a friendship with, another equal of mine."

"I'm not exactly equal, my I—Jing-Xi," Harry pointed out. He could tell she was a bit stronger than he was.

"You are equal in all the ways that matter, Harry." Jing-Xi squeezed his hand again. "At this level, one must stop comparing and accept what comes, because there are precious few of us in the world."

Harry felt his shoulders slump in relaxation. "So you don't mind that I may have broken the courtesies between us, or violated the Pact without knowing what it was," he murmured.

"No." Jing-Xi stood. "I cannot stay long this time, but I need not teach you everything all at once, either. Do I have your permission to come back and approach you again, Harry vates?"

Surprised at the sudden formality, Harry blinked. "Why would you need my permission?"

"You are, essentially, Lord of the British Isles," said Jing-Xi. "Voldemort is mad, and Falco Parkinson abdicated responsibility by retreating from the world for so long a stretch of time. And I would normally never step onto another Lord's territory without his invitation."

Harry kissed the back of her hand. "You are assuredly welcome, my lady." His heart was thumping hard, in wonder and joy that he might actually understand something about what he was. The bird on his

shoulder had vanished already. It approved of Jing-Xi, Harry sensed, and would not try to harm her.

“Thank you, Harry.” Jing-Xi smiled at him. “Declared or not, I find a congenial spirit in you. I think we will work well together.” Her smile widened. “Perhaps I might even persuade Stormgale to meet you, at one point in the future.”

After the thoughts of suicide and a carefully restrained present that had haunted him this week, Harry thought, it was odd to think of a future unmarred by the presence of Voldemort, a future where he might be what he actually wanted to be.

It was even stranger to think that there was someone as powerful as he was who could help him in reaching that future.

“It would be a pleasure to meet her,” he said, and gave Jing-Xi a bow, and if there was anything wrong with how deeply he bowed, she didn’t correct him.

Intermission: Now Comes The Night

Snape kept his eyes down as he listened to Regulus pacing in the next room. His hands never stopped moving, grinding the precise combination of crushed petals and leaves for the next step of the potion. The Glorious Fire potion was supposed to be difficult. In reality, Snape knew, the main difficulty lay in having patience with the liquid and how it needed to boil long enough to make it. Most brewers could not wait hours, watching like a lizard on a rock, and still apply the next infusion of leaves at the precise moment.

That moment arrived. Snape dropped in the leaves and stirred the potion with his glass stirring rod. The potion trembled, and then a tendril of white spread through the liquid, moving outward from the center, extending itself in gentle ripples until it was mostly pale with just a drop of blue in the corner, like a staring eye. Snape considered it. Not as thick as he would have preferred it to be, meaning the flames would not burn for more than an hour, but it would do. He moved to gather a cloth; the potion would need to be strained, a last step to remove any impurities, and something else that impatient brewers often forgot.

“Severus?”

He did not drop the cloth. He did not drop the stirring rod. He did not turn around. He only said, “Black,” with as little welcome in his voice as the lizard watching on the wall might have given a snake.

“I need to talk to you.”

That is not new, Snape thought, as he turned back to the cauldron and dipped the fine mesh into the potion. It clung, dripping, and Snape wrung it out with counterclockwise motions of his hands, slow and subtle, his gaze fixed on the size of the splashes the drops made when they hit the liquid in the cauldron, not on Regulus. What Regulus said would not be anything he wished to hear.

“So speak,” said Snape, when some moments had passed in silence and he was certain at least an eighth of the potion had been properly strained. The thinner liquid was crowding to the top of the cauldron,

floating above the thicker potion. It reminded Snape of the foam on a mug. And then he blinked, and the memories were safely tucked away, and it reminded him of nothing at all.

“I—“

And Regulus fell silent. He had been doing that often of late, Snape thought, as he picked up a vial and filled it with the thinner, cream-like Glorious Fire. It was not Snape's fault that he could not finish his sentences.

Regulus did seem to have a secret, from the way he stammered and hinted and flushed of late. Had Snape not known better, he would have said Regulus was working for the Order of the Phoenix, even as he was. But Regulus never spent long periods of time alone; he sought out Snape and had stunted conversations instead. Snape thought it much more likely he had a lover somewhere, or was convinced he had “sullied” himself by casting an unusual Dark Arts spell in the raid last week, and did not want to admit it.

“Yes?” Snape asked, when the silence had stretched long enough to pluck on his nerves like fingers, and looked up.

“Do you—“ Regulus made a vague gesture at the Riddle house, and, Snape supposed, the other Death Eaters who were somewhere in it. “Do you ever feel like you're not part of them?” he whispered. “That you don't belong?”

Snape's eyes did not narrow, because he willed them not to. Regulus knew better than anyone the differences between Snape and the rest of the Dark Lord's followers. He had been the one to pluck at the beauty and grace in Snape, to force him to see himself as different from those buried under a rightful flood-tide of hatred and contempt, to make him go to Dumbledore. That Snape had not shared any of these conclusions with Regulus was irrelevant. The man knew his differences.

Which could only mean that he was talking about his own.

And Snape did not want to hear Regulus talking about that. Regulus was not that good an actor. In truth, Snape thought, he had joined the Death Eaters because his parents wanted one son who followed the Dark properly, and he was tolerated mostly because he was the heir of an undeniably pureblood family. Where someone like Snape, a halfblood, would have to work hard to prove himself, Regulus's heritage spoke for him. But he did not have that stable a position, and he could tip from it if he dared too much.

To hear Regulus questioning himself, trying to hatch a conscience that he had not so far indulged, was to have a vision of Regulus's future death when his acting skills ran out, as they inevitably must.

And so came the moment Snape had known would come, when he must conceal his changed allegiances from his—

Well. His. Trying to give a name to Regulus and what Regulus had done to him was beyond his abilities.

"I never feel that way," he said, and stripped his voice of tone, of emotion, of inflection that could possibly be taken as encouraging a confession. "I feel only that I must belong, and if I do not succeed in one spell or battle tactic, I will try another." His hand rested on the cauldron. "My potions are my belonging. You know what would happen if I failed with the Glorious Fire, or any other concoction that our Lord asked me to brew."

It was a warning, as clear as he could give without actually speaking it aloud, of what would happen to Regulus if he stepped outside the boundaries of his Lord's tolerance. And given that Regulus did not have even the leniency that Snape's "devotion" to Voldemort and his skill at potions had earned him, he would fall faster and further than could happen to Snape.

Regulus's face closed, and he nodded once. "You're right. Of course. My condolences for your lost time, Severus." He turned and shut the door behind him.

Snape stared at the place where he had been, and tried to soothe the small voice that whispered this had been a mistake. It had been a

mistake for Regulus to start thinking. He was not intelligent enough to survive if he did that.

[illegible]

“Morsmordre!”

Peter Pettigrew shivered as the snake and skull blossomed on his arm like a cancer. Snape, standing at his Lord's side—he had been the one to capture the Muggle Pettigrew had killed, and so he had a place of honor for the initiation—glared into his old enemy's eyes.

Pettigrew bowed his head. Of course, he would know now that Snape was a Legilimens, and he would want to avoid having his every secret read out of him. Snape took a deep breath, a slow one so as to avoid making his robes shudder and reveal his weakness, and locked his hatred in the back of his mind.

So Pettigrew had been among his tormentors at Hogwarts. What did it matter? They were all in the darkness here. And Snape stood higher in the Dark Lord's favor than this quivering, cringing coward could ever hope to do. And while he knew that he had become extremely important to Albus Dumbledore, even as he used the spying to forge his own path through the night, Pettigrew had only the very thin satisfaction of knowing his own fear had made him a traitor to his friends.

But it did not work. The impulse to attack was still there. Snape could not even decide which torture he would use, should Pettigrew suddenly be handed to him; there were too many poisons, too many painful spells, and he would use each one with the knowledge that he really wanted James Potter or Sirius Black to be writhing in front of him. But their pet would do. He would do very well.

“Severus, stay.”

Snape fell into a kneel beside the throne as the other Death Eaters left, Pettigrew among them now, scurrying along with his head lowered and his shoulders hunched. He felt Voldemort's hand slide

along his skin, lingering to trace the outsides of his eyesockets. He did not flinch at the touch. Long practice was the most of that, but his own rage and hatred had their part to play.

"You are displeased that I have accepted this one into my service, Severus," the Dark Lord whispered.

"It is not my place to say that, my lord," said Snape. A breath. "He is yours, and I will not touch him." A breath. "I hated him, I hate him still, but I should have left such feelings behind when I entered the darkness and gave my loyalty to you." A breath.

"You should have," Voldemort said. "And I should punish you for threatening our poor, frightened Peter simply by your glare, and making his arm tremble a bit when I was casting the Dark Mark."

"Punish me, my lord," Snape said. He would use the pain the same way he always did, to steady his body and clear his mind, and remind himself of who he was and why he was fighting. "My own disloyalty shames me."

Voldemort was silent for a time. Snape wondered if he meant to use nonverbal spells. It wasn't a common tactic for him, since he wanted his victims and his enemies to be able to anticipate what he was doing, and make it that much sweeter for him.

Then the Dark Lord said, "No, Severus. Not this time, I do not think. I will ask that you watch Peter instead. A traitor may betray twice. If you see one step out of line, if you see one twitch of the little rat's tail that I have not ordered, then you will report to me at once."

Snape felt an enormous peace sweep over him, soothing his hatred with the coolness of foam. Intellectually, of course, he knew this was a tactic the Dark Lord often used, setting his own followers to spy on one another, compete for his favor, and channel their aggressive energy into overthrowing each other instead of him.

Emotionally, he did not care. He at last had one of the Marauders within his grasp. And should Pettigrew twitch his tail not to Voldemort's orders, then Snape would perform the torture fully,

happily, gladly, and in such a way as to convince any doubters of what he really was—because, with Pettigrew, he would be a Death Eater, not Dumbledore's spy.

"Thank you, my lord," he whispered.

There was a look in Regulus's eyes, later, that said he might have lingered by the door of the room and overheard. There was a look in Snape's eyes that warned him not to try interrogation.

Regulus never did.

[illegible]

Severus!

Groggy, disoriented, Snape woke. He had been awake for more than two days, first brewing, then confirming that the new variation of the Black Plague spores Adalrico Bulstrode had tried really left none of their victims alive, then slipping away to report to the Order of the Phoenix, and then engaging in a “mock duel” with Rabastan. Rabastan would have been just as happy to kill him, Snape knew, and he could return only small curses that were practically love taps, since showing his full strength would have confirmed his hatred for the man, and confirmed that emotion as a weakness. It was no wonder he had collapsed into bed the moment he could.

But it was a wonder that the Dark Lord had called to him mind-to-mind, a technique that even a very skilled Legilimens didn't often practice. Snape stumbled to his feet, made sure he had a robe on, and then hurried out of his room and towards the throne room, where he knew instinctively the Dark Lord was, thanks to the call throbbing in his mind like a sore tooth.

Severus!

Snape ran. His mind was clearing of fog as he tucked the weariness in his Occlumency pools, and he knew something was wrong.

He entered the room. He had no warning, nothing more than Bellatrix's snarled "Crucio!" Then he was on the floor, spasming with pain, and the Dark Lord was bending over him, flaying his shields away, looking for evidence of—Snape didn't know what.

He had been prepared for this, of course. The secrets he needed to protect the most, including his true loyalties, were already sunken to the bottom of his mind like stones. The rest was foam and water and light, and free for Voldemort's taking. Those claws raked through his mind, taking indeed, scraping and stirring and seeking.

Then his Lord drew back with a snarl, and, somewhere beyond his screams, Snape heard him say, "That is enough, Bella. He did not know."

Reluctantly, or so it seemed to Snape, Bellatrix let him go. He sat up, gasping with pain, but controlling himself as soon as possible. There were other people here, masked and moving restlessly, and he did not know who they were. He could not reveal weakness in front of them.

"My Lord," he whispered, and winced. He had bitten through his lower lip in his attempts to control the screams, and blood made his words sound slurred. He waited a moment, spelled it away wandlessly, and spoke more coherently. "What has happened?"

"Regulus Black has turned against me," said Voldemort, precisely and implacably. "I wished to know if you had joined him in his treachery, Severus." His scarlet eyes narrowed. "But you did not," he said. "You are still my most loyal servant."

Snape sat still. They did not have Regulus yet, he thought, or he would be here and screaming. He might have fled. But he would not keep ahead of the hunters for long, especially since he would probably go to one of the Black houses. Snape knew much about Regulus, Regulus was his his in an odd way, but Regulus was not that intelligent. And the Black houses were warded. He probably felt safe there.

And he even would have been, had not Bellatrix, born a Black, also served the Dark Lord.

The darkness came for Snape then, for the first time, true night, lapping him and swelling around him, as he saw what was going to happen—something horrible he had not caused and could not stop without revealing himself, or, at the very least, losing his position as Voldemort's trusted second-in-command.

Regulus would not live past this.

Chapter Fifty: White Wolf, White Moon

“But I don’t understand why you wanted to talk to me.”

Harry drew out his breath carefully, not wanting it to sound like a sigh. He had encountered unexpected difficulty in talking to Michael. The unhappy stares at the back of his neck had grown more frequent, and Harry had overheard Michael and Owen arguing more than once, with the words “duty” and “sworn companion” prominently mentioned. He had thought that Michael had grown tired of his service but was too proud, or too honorable, to break his oath. Harry had determined releasing him would be the best thing to do in those circumstances.

Instead, Michael appeared to understand none of the hints Harry had given him. Harry was doubly glad now that he had chosen the Room of Requirement to talk to Michael. It created a private place with thick walls, and wards that would twang if anyone tried to enter. Harry had not realized how long this would last, or how direct he would have to be.

Now he leaned forward and said as gently as he could, “Michael. You aren’t happy, and I think I can guess why.”

Michael stiffened.

“You’re—entranced with Draco,” Harry continued quietly. He didn’t want to insult Michael by calling a deeper emotion an infatuation, but neither did he want to assume the other boy was in love if it was only a crush. “It must make you uncomfortable to be near me, since I’m his lover and often with him. I’m offering to release you from your oath so you don’t have to keep suffering.”

Michael looked as if he were drowning, mouth open and dark eyes blinking and flashing and fluttering with emotion after emotion. Then he shook his head, and said, “You don’t understand me at all, Harry. I doubt that you ever will, as long as you continue to be blind to what’s in front of you.”

Harry blinked in turn. “Can you tell me what you mean, Michael?”

The Room had conjured a small table and chairs for them, complete with a tea service. Michael nearly tipped the cups over the side of the table as he stood up violently, shoving himself back and scattering the chair towards the far wall of the Room with a kick. Harry used his Levitation Charm to rescue the objects, and watched Michael's back thoughtfully as he paced up and down. I did underestimate his fascination with Draco after all, it seemed.

"I don't understand how you can just ignore him," Michael continued, in a low, intense voice. "Isn't it obvious that he wants to be admired for how beautiful he is, how he carries himself, the smile he gives when he's perfected an insult?" For a moment, he stood, staring into space, and then whirled around and glared at Harry. "And you don't give him a moment of physical admiration. You'll compliment his intelligence and his will and his bravery until the world ends, but his beauty slips right past you."

Harry thought about that. "I suppose it does," he said. "I wasn't taught to think of people in terms of beauty, and that influences the way I do think of them. On the other hand, Draco has never come begging, hat in hand, for this physical admiration that you seem to think he needs."

"He shouldn't have to beg." Michael folded his arms, wincing a bit. Harry suspected the lightning bolt scar on his left forearm was twanging at him. This was close to behavior that most Lords would frown on, even though it wasn't outright disobedience or hatred of the Lord. "You should notice. You should give him what he wants—all of what he wants. He shouldn't even have to ask. If he were my partner, I would do my best to love and spoil him."

"Those aren't the same thing," Harry pointed out.

"I know they aren't." Michael took a step forward. "And that's the whole point, Harry. I want to remain near you, under oath, because someone has to watch out for Draco's interests. If no one does, then he's too apt to tumble back into a depression, and start acting as if your own problems are the only ones that matter. They aren't, you know. His matter, too, and if you don't start paying attention to him, you might open your eyes some morning and find that he isn't there at all."

Harry wondered if he should feel jealousy over those words, or worry. Instead, he felt his lips widening in an amused smile. "That's ridiculous," he said.

"Is it?" Michael's voice was low and deep and smug. "Are you sure about that, Harry? You've never noticed half of what he needs. Are you so sure that you're what he wants out of life?"

"He was the one who chose this joining ritual to use with me," said Harry. "Three years, it lasts. Plenty of time for us to think about other potential partners. And he became the magical heir to his family simply so he could use this particular ritual. We're committed to each other, yes, Michael."

"Perhaps he wanted that time to think," Michael responded insistently. "Don't tell me you haven't thought of that, Harry. He can love you and still tire of you. You require infinitely more work than most other potential partners. Wouldn't he grow weary of healing you at some point and want more out of life?"

"I have thought sometimes that he might," said Harry. "But he hasn't told me so himself."

"And you haven't asked him." Michael was holding his head the way Harry thought the white stag at Walpurgis might have held it before the hunters. "I thought so. You're afraid of what he might tell you, aren't you?"

Harry leaned back and considered the other boy carefully. He was unsure what to feel. Draco hadn't said anything to Harry about tiring of him, or needing more admiration than Harry provided. On the other hand, that didn't mean he didn't want to. But Michael had every motive to say it was true even if it wasn't, because he might want Draco for himself.

In the silence, Michael started scratching at the lightning bolt scar on his arm, his expression one of irritation gradually deepening into pain.

“I’ll talk to Draco about it,” Harry said at last. “But what happens if he does want to stay with me, and the admiration that you mention isn’t as important to him as other aspects of our bond?”

“Then I still want to stay close,” said Michael. “He might change his mind.”

Harry sighed under his breath, and stood. "Thank you for talking to me about this, at least," he said. "But I don't think he's going to change his mind."

“You don’t know that.”

There was nothing Harry could say to that, not when he had seen himself persist in stubborn hope long past the time when his relationship with his parents could have been mended. He nodded at Michael and left the Room of Requirement.

SS

“So I thought I would ask you,” Harry finished, and then sat back and looked at him expectantly.

Draco stared at him. Harry had pulled him away from preparations for the Declaring ritual that he would hold on Midwinter, and Draco's head still buzzed with incantations for cold, with the smell of snow, with the thoughts of what was going to happen when he cast his wand on the ground and took that first step forward into the endless dark. By contrast, this matter was so mundane, and so obviously beyond Harry's understanding, that it was taking him some time to return to the world and deal with it.

Harry shifted in his chair, and tapped his foot on the floor. "I'll understand if you don't want to talk about it right now, Draco, or if you do need more than what I can provide," he said quietly. "I've always understood that."

“You have not,” said Draco, and rubbed his forehead, dismissing thoughts of snowflakes firmly. It wasn’t Midwinter yet, and he still had more than a month before it would be. “What you haven’t understood

is that someone could want to be with you despite your childhood and everything else. You still think of your weak points and the trouble they cause before you think of the strong ones, or the things that made me fall in love with you.” He took Harry’s hand as Harry gave him a little frown, and clasped it. “Do you remember the list I gave you for Christmas last year, detailing all the reasons that I love you?”

Harry nodded. This close, Draco could feel that he was shaking. So he isn’t as calm as he was pretending to be. Why not? He must have known that making it seem like he didn’t care wouldn’t inspire me.

And then Draco had the answer to that one, too, and simultaneously wanted to kiss Harry for being so wonderful and slap him for being so oblivious. He thought that showing too much emotion about it would influence my decision, and he wanted me to make it of my own free will. Stupid vates.

“If I am ever tiring of you, or want to break off the joining ritual,” Draco said softly, “it won’t be an interfering sworn companion who brings the news to you. I’ll let you know, Harry. I promise.” He couldn’t stop his other hand from rising and tugging on Harry’s hair in one of the possessive gestures that he indulged in sometimes, and which Harry let him perform. “Not that I ever could,” he added, and turned his head to brush his lips against Harry’s cheek.

Harry leaned his head on Draco’s shoulder, butting like a cat, the most vulnerable gesture Draco could remember him making in months. A few moments later, he’d pulled away and relaxed entirely, smiling at Draco. “Thank you,” he murmured. “I thought so, but—I wanted to be sure.”

“Of course you did,” Draco said soothingly. At least it was an improvement over what Harry would have done months or a year ago, which was brooding on the idea until he’d worked himself into the conviction that he had to make Draco leave him for his own good. “Now go practice your Animagus training. Tell Peter that you are a lynx, and making you wait to be sure is just silly. You’re a cat, Harry.”

A faint smile, and Harry was gone. Draco sat back and folded his hands behind his head, both to stretch—he’d been hunched over a

table in the library for the past five hours—and to shake his mind onto a new track. He hadn't wanted to entertain these thoughts while Harry was around, in case he caught a glimpse of one with Legilimency and objected.

Draco had a lesson to teach a certain interfering sworn companion, who evidently thought a bit of harmless flirting meant Draco was dissatisfied with the bedding and the conversations and the rituals and everything else he shared with Harry.

[illegible]

Most Light families wish for a stranger to enter their house with his wand laid across his open palms. This displays the weapon in question without making him go unarmed, which usually promotes feelings of fear and distrust that are not wished for when encouraging a truce between two families.

Harry yawned and rubbed his eyes. The book Aurora had sent him on Light pureblood traditions was a tedious read, filled with passive voice and explanations for customs and rituals that Harry generally needed no explanation for, because they were either obvious from the text or similar to the Dark dances that he already knew.

And though Harry had read many sections of the book twice now, he had still not discovered an answer to several pressing questions, such as what happened if a wizard was more dangerous without a wand than with one.

He slid the book into the trunk at the foot of his bed. He could do that without waking Draco, who was sprawled in deep sleep already, his mouth open and little whistling breaths coming through his nose. Draco was sleeping better now than he had in weeks, his study during the days—regular homework taking second place to details of the Declaration ritual and his Animagus training—exhausting him to the point where he both ate and rested like a young Granian.

Argutus met Harry as he went to the loo. The Omen snake coiled around Harry's arm and his shoulders, making the odd, tingling hiss

that Harry knew meant contentment, and which he could have imitated either from Draco's snores or from Mrs. Norris's purrs. "Did you know that the Ravenclaws have a spell they're working on that lets them track you?" he asked Harry.

Harry paused before the mirror. "You can't understand English," he reminded Argutus.

"But I am learning Latin," Argutus said brightly. "And now I know most of the common spell-words, and I can recognize your name. They're talking about seeing you, and the spell produces a golden spot of light that moves around the wall of their common room. They've marked the wall so that it represents most of the locations in the school." Argutus wriggled as Harry started to brush his teeth; he'd regained most of the age and growth he'd lost to the dust from the time-globe on the Hogwarts Express, and he was continually struggling for balance on Harry's shoulders. "But they can't perfect it yet. They keep using the wrong form of the verb. I tried to tell them that, but no one paid attention to me."

"Remember that none of them can understand Parseltongue, either," Harry murmured, and considered his reflection dubiously. Do I have to be worried about this? It's just a spell. But Snape would probably say that one House in the school trying to perfect a spell like that means that others are doing the same thing, but with more violent intent behind it.

"They should try. If I can learn Latin, they can learn Parseltongue." Argutus hung contemplatively from Harry's neck. "Perhaps I can learn to speak Latin?"

"I don't think that would work."

"Why not?"

Harry didn't know enough about vocal cords and translation spells to satisfy Argutus, so the snake was still wondering when they went to bed, and he coiled around both Harry and Draco, an extra, living blanket of warmth. Harry gathered Draco in his arms and closed his eyes. If he were lucky, then this sleep would be free of dreams.

He wasn't lucky.

The dream started slowly. Harry seemed to float in darkness, looking down on gleams of green from a great distance. They could be trees, he thought, but they weren't trees. He knew what they would be. He'd had this dream several times already. He waited in silent suffering for the realization, unable to verbalize it before his sleeping self knew it.

Killing Curses. They were Killing Curses. And witches and wizards were casting them at each other, moving in the middle of that great darkness on the ground, screaming in voices from which everything but terror and the desire to cause more terror had gone. Harry felt his sleeping self start and gasp in horror, but he didn't wake up. The invisible chain on which he hung began to reel more urgently, lowering him closer and closer to the chaos.

Everywhere he looked, people died. The darkness had yielded to firelight, and the light of other curses, and the white-glitter light of magic that consumed from the inside. Wizards and witches writhed on the ground, and turned on their own relatives, and put their wands into their own eyes and cast Avada Kedavra so that they could escape the nightmare the world had turned into. Harry watched as dangerous artifacts lay in the rubble of a building that might once have been the Ministry of Magic, free to anyone who wanted to come and gather them.

And he had caused this.

That was the message of the dream, available when he wanted to look at it. His insistence on casting the stability of the wizarding world to hell and gone had done this. If he persevered, many people would suffer. If he remained still and quiet, and considered how to wield his power before he wielded it, then only a few would suffer. And wasn't that to be preferred, all things considered?

Harry had had this dream over and over again, and each time he had been unable to wake up before it ended or talk about it when he was awake. He had sensed the magic that ran over and under it like reins, binding the images to his mind and his mouth to silence. He had not

put up any sort of trouble or rebellion, and the mind that drove it had grown careless lately, evidently thinking that the quiet meant Harry was considering his lessons like a good little boy.

Harry felt himself drift into a moment just before waking, when the reins started slipping from his mind.

He grabbed them and drew them tight, and his mind shook like a wild horse, and then full control over it returned to him. Harry heard a shocked gasp resound in his ears, and he caught a glimpse of a whirling white shape that might have been a sea eagle and might have been a maelstrom.

“Hello, Falco,” he said pleasantly.

The whirling white figure turned towards him. Harry saw green eyes shining with rage. He struck hard, plunging himself into them, trying to tear them out of Falco’s imagined head. On a battlefield like this, victory usually belonged to the wizard who could envision the best solutions, or understand the mental reflections of magic the best.

And Falco was no Legilimens. The magic reaching out to him was dream magic. Scrimgeour had written to Harry, detailing the information on Falco he had received from someone called the Liberator, and Harry knew this was composed of both Light and Dark. That meant Falco could most likely defend himself from other dreams, should Harry try to turn the trick back on him, but it was no guarantee that he had Occlumency shields guarding the more vulnerable parts of his mind.

Sure enough, Harry plunged past no more than the usual barriers that most wizards carried against mental attack. He found himself in a turning, twisting pattern of wind and water and light. He struck heavily left, or what was to the left in a place like this, and let a current speed him along. Now that he was within Falco’s thoughts, what would draw him were memories related to him, and hopefully not just the memories of the times Falco watched him and thought him a very naughty boy.

Harry knew what he would like to find, but he had no idea if he stood any chance of finding it.

The current slammed him straight into a barrier rather like a reef, and Harry reeled back, gasping for breath. Then he saw the memory in front of him, and he reached out and grasped it greedily.

The image enveloped him completely. Harry stood on the ridge of a hill in front of a wood that gaped with incredible green. He wasn't sure if it was the Forbidden Forest or some place similar, but it sang with magic to him—and webs. Harry had to grit his teeth and turn his back on the trees so that he could concentrate on what the two wizards who occupied the ridge were saying.

One was Falco, his face a good deal more patient than it had ever been when Harry met him. The other was a young Albus Dumbledore. He didn't wear robes, but a suit that made Harry think this was the late nineteenth century. At least, it might be if Dumbledore had any realistic grasp of Muggle fashions. Harry reminded himself that he didn't know that for certain.

Falco gestured with a staff twined with flowers and vines. "Yes, I was Headmaster for only a year, Albus. And I regretted becoming the Lord of Hogwarts almost the moment I persuaded the governors to accept me."

"Why, sir?" Harry wondered if he had ever heard Dumbledore's voice sound respectful before this. Perhaps the time he had viewed another memory of Dumbledore with Falco, the time when the older wizard had explained that it was impossible to become a vates without sacrificing one's magic.

"Because I discovered that obedience was almost impossible to achieve." Falco spoke with condescending regret so thick in his voice that Harry found he would have liked to give him a right good thumping. "Sculpting a child's mind must happen young. Without that, a child reaches the age of eleven, and comes to Hogwarts, and though you might try to teach him obedience, he's already learned too much of the evil ways that his family encourages. He'll think of himself before anyone else. He'll think of goals and ambitions instead

of limitations. And especially if he's magically powerful, he'll grasp at the future and try to rip off a piece for himself instead of asking if such change is really for the best."

Dumbledore nodded solemnly. "And that's why you really gave it up, sir? Because it was no good?"

"It was no good for me," Falco corrected gently. "But I didn't know as much about the ethics of sacrifice then as I do now. Perhaps if I were to go back and try again, I would find it more congenial. But I do not have the time or the inclination to try. I do encourage you to keep trying, Albus, not to let up on your ambitions. Someday, you will make a wonderful Headmaster of Hogwarts. But try not to let your charges indulge in too much rebellion. It ruins them.

"Come to think of it," Falco added musingly, "perhaps the reason I never succeeded was that Hogwarts in my time carried so many predominately pureblood students—though I know many halfbloods who slipped through pretending to be pure. With Muggleborns, you might have better luck. They're isolated in our world. When they enter, they don't know anyone, and sometimes they'll cling to anything that promises them a solid perch."

"And I should never encourage disobedience from them, sir?" Dumbledore seemed a bit doubtful. "Octavian says that sometimes a bit of slack on the lead rein is good for the soul."

"Octavian is a Malfoy," said Falco flatly. "Of course he would say that. Just remember, Albus, the Malfoys always mean to be the ones holding the rein, not the ones on the other end of it."

Dumbledore nodded. Harry studied him warily. He was not sure which was stranger, to see him alive again or to see his face without his long white beard.

"If a child disobeys you, then he disobeys the ethics of sacrifice that I am passing on to you," said Falco. "A few slips may be acceptable, if you discover them early enough and then press down the net all the harder. Such a slip must never happen twice. The mistakes must always be new and fresh. And I do hope that you don't make

mistakes of your own, Albus. Unless you disbelieve in everything I'm teaching you, of course."

"Of course not, sir," Dumbledore hastened to assure him.

The force of the wind and water pulled Harry out of the memory then, but he was grinning, in spite of knowing that he'd seen the seeds of his mother's corruption planted in that memory, and his own abuse.

I thought so. The three times that my parents defied Dumbledore, and made him one of the Dark Lords to fulfill the prophecy, could also be the three times they defied Falco. Now, of course, I just have to be sure that all their disobedience actually rested on flouting the ethics of sacrifice. Peter's told me one incident that qualifies, when my parents ran away on the eve of the First War. Now—

And then magic struck him full force, and shoved him tumbling into the air.

Harry found himself landed violently back into his body. He started awake with a shout that made Argutus crawl to the other end of the bed, hissing, and Draco grab him and hold him firmly.

"Harry?"

Harry didn't answer him for a moment, scanning his own mind with a restless gaze. He couldn't sense a trace of Falco anywhere within it. Of course, he hadn't sensed a trace of him before, either. But the compulsion to keep silent on the subject of the dreams should be broken now, so he could go to Snape and ask for help in cleansing any lingering taint.

If I should. Do I want to press more troubles on him when he's struggling with his own evil dreams?

"Harry," Draco said, and shook him. "What was that nightmare about?"

The choice had been taken from him, Harry realized. He had to do what he could to explain the nightmares, or Draco would talk to

Snape, and that would mean shouting and scolding. Really, Harry supposed, life was simpler when he did talk about his nightmares and other things he suffered.

But I can't seem to care about them as much as others want me to. Only yesterday, Joseph had talked to him for two hours about how Harry should have some appreciation for his own life outside of what it meant to other people. He had appeared overly excited when Harry cautiously mentioned that sometimes he liked watching sunrises. Harry had kept his pity for Joseph's excitement to himself.

“Harry!”

A fearful tone had crept into Draco's voice. Harry shook his head and forced himself to start talking about the dreams. At least they weren't as frightening as his visions of Voldemort—Falco was simply an amateur when it came to designing nightmares—and he had some hope of resisting them now.

[illegible]

“Are you all right?” Draco asked, when his touch on Harry’s shoulder had made Harry jump for the third time that day.

Harry nodded and stuffed his hand into his robe pocket. "Of course. Just—restless."

He knew why. Today was a typical day in late November, with perhaps a touch more of a nipping wind in the air than usual, and the first proper snowfall they'd received yet, large enough for the first-years to make balls out of and throw at one another. But tonight was the first night of November's full moon.

Harry had felt the magic boiling in him the moment he woke. It wasn't a power he'd encountered before, even when he was around his pack as they transformed. For one thing, it had a raw, brutal edge that infected him with wildness, instead of letting him merely sense and appreciate it. For another, it had the feeling of a great stretched cord about it, as though its end terminated somewhere far in the south and

west. Harry remembered Thomas's theory that the werewolf curse had its origin in the ancient Americas, and had crossed to Europe sometime in the last ten thousand years, and wondered.

He had made his own choice. He would let the magic of Loki's vengeance ritual envelop him tonight, and travel with the rest of the pack to—wherever it was Loki waited. He had consulted with Camellia, and though she refused to tell him exactly what would happen, she'd reassured him it was safe. She'd even reassured Draco and Snape, who'd taken a great deal more convincing. Harry had finally managed to hush them by pointing out that this was rather like the truce-dance, or fighting the Dark at Midwinter: something wild and dangerous he didn't have a great deal of control over, but which should protect him as long as he stayed within carefully maintained boundaries.

Draco guided him across the grounds and into the courtyard, where Harry locked his legs and refused to go further. Being inside walls today only increased the restlessness. He turned his head, wondering if he would sense something different should he face in the direction where Loki stood right now. But the twanging pull remained the same no matter how he turned.

"I'll give you a Calming Draught if it'll help, Harry," Draco murmured into his ear.

Harry shook his head and rubbed his palm on his robes to dry it of sweat. "No. I—I can do this, Draco. Whatever this is." He gave Draco a smile. Draco looked as if he were reconsidering his decision to let Harry go.

If he reconsiders at this point, I doubt it'll make much difference. The pull had grown taut in Harry's nerves and spinal cord. Snape could try to hold him back, and so could McGonagall, and Draco could possess his body and try to control it. None of that would matter in such a short while.

Draco touched him again, and Harry spun, snapping his teeth. Draco retreated with his hands held up before him. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

“So am I.” Harry pressed his hand to his forehead. It was still hours from the full moon. He shouldn’t be reacting like this. “I don’t understand what I—“

The pull grew so fierce and sharp that Harry turned and took several steps forward, towards the gates of Hogwarts. Howls cascaded past his ears, and in his nostrils was the smell of snow and pine needles. The odd blessing Remus had given him when they parted was meaningful now.

“Harry!”

“It’s full moon, wherever Loki is,” Harry whispered, and then he took another step forward and departed.

It wasn’t Apparition. He flew instead of squeezing through nothingness. Harry thought it was something like his adventure with the Time-Turner from his third year. Clashing waves of impressions swept and sang over him. He heard snatches of ancient languages, and the laughter of people long dead, and the howls of wolves that no longer walked the earth. The howls quickly became the loudest sound, and pressed against his ribs like knives, and then squeezed him after all, out and down and through.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He stood on white snow, in the center of a dim, deep forest. He turned his head, snuffling. He was a wolf, and the fur clad his limbs like a warm robe. Harry looked at it, trying to determine what color he was, but the change, or perhaps the moonlight, had stolen his ability to distinguish between shades that fine. He only knew he was dark, perhaps black, perhaps a thick gray.

The trees were giant spruces, soaring and meshing into one another, except for wide clearings here and there like the one in which the pack stood. Harry drank the smell of needles, and of snow. That was the sharpest, most prevalent scent. The world was full of tin. He sniffed, and caught different mixtures. The snow on the ground was different from the snow on the branches of the spruces.

In fact, it was different from any smell Harry had ever caught, altogether wilder and more spirited and more intense. He didn’t think

he could attribute that just to his new body. He didn't think they were in England any more. He knew they weren't in the same century any more.

Around him stirred the pack, the members sniffing and rubbing cheeks and jowls and noses. Tails boiled the air, and nails scraped the ground, and streams of piss turned the snow a color Harry knew was yellow, though right now the scent was the most interesting thing about it. The scent told him age and sex and state of health and pack rank and proclivity far more clearly than a name could have. He sensed Camellia towards the front, and moved in her direction.

She made a wonderful sight, standing there, her shadow thrown long and defiant across the open ground. Harry had always thought a werewolf unnatural compared to a wolf, too long of leg and square of muzzle; in fact, Remus had claimed the same thing. But in this forest, Camellia looked as if she belonged. She surveyed them all, ears twitching, tail up, gaze so calm that Harry found himself relaxing. He might not know what was going to happen, but she did. He was certain of it.

And then the pack turned. Harry felt the currents of the packmind flowing around him, bypassing him. He yelped in mourning, and then saw who had entered the clearing, and went rapt and still himself.

Loki stood there in his wolf form, pale, white enough to fuzz into invisibility where his fur collided with the moonlight. His amber eyes were two glittering points of brightness in the midst of it all. His scent proclaimed him chosen, and marked out, and no longer a part of the pack.

And it proclaimed him something else, something Harry was trying hard to deal with at the moment.

Loki turned and surged into the forest. The pack followed him, a near-soundless rush, the impact of paws on snow a great deal more silent than Harry would have thought it could be. He found himself running with them, his nostrils full of knowledge, his ribs full of bruising brushes from larger and stronger bodies, his throat full of sorrow.

This was not a chase. This was not a following to a great clearing where Loki would dance his death dance and then die, as Harry would have said when he was human.

This was a hunt.

And Loki's scent proclaimed him prey.

He ran fast. Harry saw his shadow sweep ahead, but only for a few moments. He was gone, then, dashing across the needles like a hawk in flight, burying himself in the lees of the spruces. Had there been undergrowth in the way, Harry thought they might not have been able to follow at all.

But this forest had many wide open spaces on purpose, and a lack of undergrowth. It had been made for such hunts. Harry wondered if anyone ever used it for anything else.

Camellia howled. In moments, the pack took up the sound, baying like hounds, baying like horns, baying in full voice. Loki kept silent. Of course he did, Harry thought, even as his own timid howl mingled with the others; he'd never done this before. The stag did not speak when he was hunted. It was the wolves that did, singing salute and hail to their prey.

And farewell, farewell, farewell.

Harry dodged around trees and scrambled up slopes that would have left him tired and panting in moments as a human. Scents and sounds, more than sights, guided him, and warmth nearby let him know when one of his packmates ran close. His fur shielded him from the cold. Shadows flashed a swift death and died, judged in instants by instincts Harry hadn't known he had and regarded as neither food nor enemy nor brother, and therefore quite useless. He ran, and tasted the joy of what the werewolf transformation could be, at least under the influence of Wolfsbane. Mind and body sang the same song, without introspection, without judgment, without second-guessing.

Save that under the wolf, somewhere, struggled the mind of a very human boy who knew what would happen when they reached the end of the hunt, and was desperate to find some way to escape it.

The magic was too old, too strong, Harry realized as they topped a ridge and scrabbled down among boulders, the spruces fading around them. It had changed him into a wolf. It had brought him, and the others, here, parting time like water. He could not resist it. And Loki had chosen this fate when he embraced vengeance. The magic had given him the ability to pass through Harry's wards and resist Harry's spells.

And now it would claim its price.

Harry wondered if it was perversity, custom, or individual stubbornness that had made Loki offer him the chance to participate in this, a ritual that the pack had obviously known well and he did not.

The pack's cry burst around him again, swelling and whirling and drifting down like snow. Ahead of them, the ground broke into a deep ravine, one too wide to span by leaping. It was a place they might have cornered a stag, proud lord of the forest, whirling around to face them with stamping hooves and head lowered, antlers brought to bear.

Loki was no stag, but he was the prey. He turned, with his back to the ravine, his flanks heaving with his panting, his lolling tongue a darker slash against his pale fur. Harry saw him lift his head for all that, standing with his throat and chest bared to the teeth of the first rush.

Willing sacrifice.

The magic howled all around them, a tide heavy and thick as blood, an ancient voice that gave and then took away again. Harry felt no sentience from it, as he did from the lizard-tailed bird or the vicious power that belonged to Voldemort. This was magic that had been old when wizards were learning how to make wands, that understood only the terms of a bargain always made and always kept, a bargain that it was not possible to break once it had been enacted.

Harry knew its name then, and it was hunger.

Camellia surged forward from the edge of the pack, and whirled as she came close to Loki, her teeth shutting on the fur of his chest. Harry saw her wrench her head sideways. The white fur tore. Blood sang down his body and spattered on the snow. Loki swayed, but remained on his feet.

Camellia flung her jaws back, and chewed.

And Harry felt the sacrifice travel into her, and he understood, then, why Loki would have made a bargain like this. It was not merely to avenge the murder of his mate, though that doubtless must have been a factor.

Each bite taken would spread his blessing to the pack. Each wolf who ate of him would absorb part of his power, and since he died a willing sacrifice, the magic was doubly or triply potent. Loki had given his pack to Harry because he did not believe that he could be a good alpha to them any longer. But he had still abandoned them, in a sense, and he was making up for that abandonment now.

Harry didn't know why this should come as a shock to him. The notion of eating an enemy and gaining of his strength had been prevalent in some human cultures, too, at some points.

But he did know that he could not be part of it. If he had been fully absorbed into the magic of the ritual, then maybe...maybe. But he was still a wizard, and not a werewolf, and so he found the strength to gain control of his legs and back away, to the very edge of the pack.

He stood there with his nose buried in the snow, shielding it as best he could from the scent of blood, while wolf after wolf went forward and took his or her turn at the feast. He was not sure when Loki died. Perhaps life would linger in him until the last bite was consumed, or until the blood and flesh and organs had been eaten and only fur and bones were left.

He became aware of a pale shape crouched close beside him. Turning, Harry saw the ghostly form of Gudrun, Loki's mate, who had accompanied him to Kieran's slaying.

Harry stared at her in silence. She regarded him with enormous dark-silver eyes, and then stretched out her tongue and licked his cheek, as she had when she and Loki came for Kieran. Harry felt her saliva trickle down his fur, cold even through its protection, chill as steel or death.

He wondered if the lick was her way of trying to explain to him the grand and terrible and wonderful thing happening here, too terrible and wonderful for him to grasp.

Harry closed his eyes and lay down in the snow, folding his paws beneath him and tucking his tail around his nose. He could not stop the sacrifice. Apart from the strength of the ritual's magic, Loki had chosen this path. Harry had told Joseph that he would not prevent someone else's freely chosen suicide, and he had meant it.

He had simply not thought he would be forced to prove it so soon.

He did not know how long it lasted, only that it seemed to last forever. The moon was setting when Camellia's nose nudged at him and pulled him to his feet, but since it had risen before this time in England, Harry thought it might still be aloft at home.

Home. The word had never sounded so good to him.

He walked beside Camellia for a few stiff steps, and then—he could not help it—he turned to look back.

He did not see the small mangled pile that might be all that was left of Loki's earthly remains. He saw the ghost of Gudrun, rearing, as a silvery shape flew at her, gaining form and coherence as it moved. It was Loki, a strong-chested wolf, set free from grief and life at last, nipping his mate's shoulder to get her to play with him.

Harry watched them tumble and chase each other, a pair of pale wolves beneath the pale moon, whirling out over the ravine. When they reached the far cliff, they hovered for a moment, noses touching, tails wagging.

Then they leaped, skimming over the boulders and the sheer drop, ascending towards the stars. They faded as they rose. Harry knew he would never see them again, or know where they went.

He bowed his head and followed the push of Camellia's gently insistent muzzle, back towards the clearing where the magic would change him again into a wizard and bear him back to the world he understood.

Chapter Fifty-One: Ideals of Restraint

It wasn't hard to catch Michael's eye, not when the other boy almost drooled on himself the moment he saw Draco. Now I know why my mother never wanted people fawning on her, Draco thought, waving Michael over to him as he stood just outside the Great Hall. However would one get the stains out of one's robes?

"Was there something you wanted, Draco?" Michael looked as if he wanted to draw his wand. A moment later, he did, giving in and casting a privacy ward.

"There is." Draco cocked his head and stood straighter. He'd been leaning against the wall, as much to encourage Michael to underestimate him as anything else, but for this, he needed to be standing as upright as possible. The more he thought about it, the more he saw Michael's assumptions about his bond with Harry, and especially the joining ritual, as insulting to himself. Michael was in love with someone who didn't really exist. Time for Draco to show him who did. "I know that you spoke to Harry about me a few days ago."

Michael's head jerked up. "He spoke to me," he clarified. "I wanted to leave matters just as they were, Draco. I'm content to watch from afar for the day when he hurts you."

"And you think that's going to happen?" Draco's voice sounded odd in his ears—familiar, still, but a strange thing to hear emerging from his own mouth. A moment later, he identified the reason for that. He sounded like Lucius, far more than he had for months.

"Of course it is," said Michael. "You were the one who encouraged me to admire you, Draco. You need admiration for your beauty. Oh, you need to be loved for your mind and your skills, as well, but I can do that, and love you in the other ways that you deserve to be loved. Harry can't. He told me himself that he was conditioned never to think about looks when gazing at other people."

He leaned forward, eyes shining, and Draco suppressed the impulse to move backward, even as his rage surged. He comes off as half-deranged, but I think he really means what he's saying. He thinks he

can give me what Harry can, plus all those other things that Harry will always have trouble with.

He hasn't thought about what I want back, though, has he?

Draco let his lip curl and his eyes flick up and down Michael's body. "Hm. Well, I suppose I can understand where you're coming from," he said, letting his voice drag with reluctant interest. "But there's at least one bond with Harry that I've never shared with you."

"What is it?" Michael stood up straight himself, practically vibrating. "Tell me what it is. We can duplicate it."

You couldn't. You never could. The most amazing thing about this to Draco was not that someone would reach out to him while he was involved in a joining ritual—of course someone else might find him impossible to resist, and the ritual was not absolutely closed to outsiders until next Halloween—but that that other person wouldn't consider what was in this new bond for Draco. How could they match Harry's power, his laughter, the sight of him when he'd broken the phoenix web or when he'd Vanished Fenrir Greyback from existence for the crime of hurting Draco? Admiration was not enough; Draco saw that on enough faces every day. What really mattered to him was what could come back, as a gift, those things he couldn't invent or charm out of just anyone.

And Michael had nothing to offer on that scale.

"I can possess people," said Draco. "I've been in Harry's mind numerous times, practicing control of muscles and thoughts with him. Can you stand to let me possess you? I don't need as much practice any more, but that's one of the reasons I know I can trust Harry completely, because he never refuses me entrance to his mind. Will you let me do the same thing?"

"Of course," said Michael, and leaned down, holding eye contact. "I can't even imagine why anyone would refuse you."

You're about to find out.

Draco leaned back on the wall so that he would have some support, should his body sag, and leaped outwards into Michael's mind. He could have drifted among the thoughts, and let Michael sense him as simply a foreign presence. That was the Lighter side of his gift.

But the gift—born, as far as Draco could tell, from his transformed empathy mingled with something of the latent Black compulsion—was ultimately Dark now, a tool of domination and control. He had forced the Minister to do something he would never do, Stunning himself and the other Aurors so that Harry could escape during the jailbreak. And he was going to show Michael his true nature. He valued compulsion and control more than free will, unless it meant the free will of a few specific people, and he had no problems demonstrating that.

He lashed sideways, through Michael's mind, and took control of his body in the most painful way possible. He made all his muscles as taut as he could, and choked off his breath. For a moment Michael wavered, blue in the face, trying desperately to gulp in air. Draco showed off his complete indifference to the idea of Michael's death. After all, if the body he was in did die, Draco could always jump to another one. He could kill invisibly, undetectably, as he had on the battlefield at Midsummer, when he'd seized control of more than one Death Eater's mind and used his victims to guide others to the weak points in the wards—traps baited with deadly spells.

Draco had killed. And he did not regret it. He had felt sick while he did it, but afterwards, no guilt had troubled him. He let those emotions seep through to Michael, too, relentless indifference.

The gentle boy Michael thought he loved, who needed reassurance and admiration just to make it through the day, did not exist. What did was a Dark wizard on the verge of Declaring, and who would not hesitate to use his weapons to get his way, punish his enemies, and even inflict deadly lessons on those who irritated him. Draco was not Harry. He had no intention of holding back unless it was actually conducive to his goals to do so, while Harry would hold back to give others a chance to recover, or think, or choose another course.

Draco ripped himself free at last, knowing he would leave Michael with an enormous headache. He was back in his own body by the time the hold on Michael's throat eased, and he offered him a cool smile that made him flinch back.

"You should ask Harry to release you from your oath," Draco whispered. "He might want to give you a chance, but you and I both know, now, that you'll never have a chance with me."

"I could tell him that you flirted with me, that you encouraged me in the first place," Michael said. His voice was scratchy, and he coughed. Draco watched with satisfaction. He would feel the pain of choking, but there were no telltale finger-shaped bruises on his throat that might have got Draco in trouble.

"You could," Draco agreed. "And he would be angry at me, doubtless. And you could tell him that I possessed you, too, and forced you to see the truth, and he would be angry at me." He took a step closer. "But his anger will pass. Harry is in love with me. I don't think you understand that. His anger could last for months, and in the end, it would change to forgiveness. You have no standing in his eyes compared to me."

He waited until Michael's gaze, simmering with resentment—more for the breaking of his illusions than anything else, Draco thought—settled fully on him, and then added, "Besides, if you tell him, I'll be sure to know. And then what I did to you just now will seem like a Cheering Charm."

Michael flinched away from him, face sick with fear. Draco snorted. "The regard you had for me is insulting, you know," he told him. "My last name is Malfoy. And you believed me a kitten?"

He turned his back on Michael and walked in the direction of the dungeons, where he knew Joseph was working with Harry. Michael's eyes flared at his back the entire way. Draco doubted there was any love left in them now. He had wondered, at first, if Michael would refuse to learn the point and remain stubbornly, obliviously, around, waiting to pick up the pieces from a shattering between Harry and Draco that was never going to come.

I want the monitoring board to have a chance to become what Scrimgeour wants the Ministry to be. It's a chance for ordinary wizards and witches to look around, realize I won't trample all over them, and start thinking instead of merely reacting."

"All of those are commendable ideals," said Joseph. "Or they would be, if you thought to point those new enemies at all proponents of irrationality, and not just at yourself. You told me that you value the monitoring board as chains on your power, boundaries on your sense of self. Why is that, Harry?"

"I am still a Lord-level wizard in power," said Harry. "Not a Declared Lord, and I never will be, but I can intimidate others, and prevent them from bringing up perfectly valid points that I've ignored. I want to show everyone that I won't ignore those points, that I value those other perspectives, that I'm willing to cramp and cripple my own magic, if necessary, so that they can have the security and space to breathe and think that they need."

He jumped, cursing, in the next moment. The bird had appeared on his shoulder without warning, and its claws had raked down the side of his face, a punishing gesture Harry had thought it incapable of now. He gingerly touched his hand to the freezing scabs and glared as the bird wheeled through the air, clacking its beak and hissing.

Its cold, vicious voice came to him as it had not for months now. Bound to you. Hate you. Love you. Hate being bound.

"I know you do," Harry muttered. "And that's one reason I won't let you go free. You would do damage if you were unrestrained."

The bird dived at him, claws spread wide. Harry ducked, and the creature passed over his head with a whiff of magic and wind and faded through the wall. Harry shook his head.

"Your magic is displeased at the thought of being cramped and crippled, I would assume." Joseph's voice held just the faintest trace of amusement.

"I can't help it that it's displeased," Harry snapped, sitting back up. "I can't just spread its influence wherever it wants to go. If nothing else, that encourages people to sway towards me because of the power of my magic. It's an unconscious compulsion, but it's a form of compulsion nonetheless. They'll make decisions just to get close to me, to feel that power for themselves."

"And when you know that resisting and cramping and caging your magic might send it back to Voldemort?" Joseph asked steadily.

Harry lowered his eyes.

"You are not to blame for the natural reaction your magic provokes in others," said Joseph. "Especially since caging it only results in its growing a personality and determining to break free once more. You have seen the disastrous consequences of that already, Harry. I believe it was called a phoenix web."

Harry exploded to his feet and paced back and forth across the room. Joseph's quarters were large, at least, and there was plenty of space for him to do that. "I don't know what to do. I've tried to give other people a chance to question me, and both Draco and Snape tell me the monitoring board was a bad idea—and then I find out that I've made people actually plot against me, like Madam Whitestag. I've tried to hold back my magic, and that only makes it angry and likely to go to my enemies. I tried to avoid interfering in the Ministry, and that didn't last long. I don't know how to keep the balance between allowing others freedom and allowing my magic enough freedom that it doesn't go mad." He ran his hand through his hair.

"That is what I have been hoping to hear from you," said Joseph, voice soaring with triumph. Harry frowned at him. Joseph smiled right back. "Your admission that forcing bounds on yourself that you would never dream of forcing on anyone else is a fool's dream. It won't work for practical reasons, and it should concern your ethics, should it not, that a vates is giving up his freedom?"

Harry leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. His magic lashed around him in coiled ribbons, shaking the maps and the banners.

“Now,” said Joseph, “the only question left is why. You do not expect Falco Parkinson and Voldemort to hold themselves back.”

“They’re Dark Lords, or tending that way,” Harry muttered, scrubbing his hand over his face. “Of course they won’t restrain themselves.”

“And Jing-Xi? Your Light Lady? Do you have a problem with the fact that when she arrives, you can feel her power through a door? You’ve said that she’s interfered to settle problems in the Chinese wizarding community before, even in the Chinese Muggle government. And you don’t hate her for that.”

Harry hunched his shoulders.

“This comes down to holding yourself to standards that others don’t have to fulfill,” Joseph continued remorselessly. “And do not feed me that line about Lord-level wizards having more power and thus more need to be careful of their magic. You don’t hold even other Lords and Ladies to your standard. You still see yourself as different, and I want to know why.”

Harry resisted the impulse to curl up and tuck his head into his arms. That wouldn’t remove Joseph’s stinging words, dragging the truth out of him like the lashes of a cat o’nine-tails, and that wouldn’t remove the fact that now he finally had to admit this to someone else. He had not said it before because he knew both Draco and Snape would overreact, refusing to take what he said seriously, and assuring him it didn’t matter at all.

“I don’t trust myself,” he whispered.

“That is the truth,” said Joseph, and Harry was achingly grateful that he had not said that of course Harry could trust himself. “And why don’t you trust yourself, Harry? That, I wish to hear.”

“You’re not going to give up, are you?” Harry asked his arms.

“No.”

Harry sighed. "I still remember the times when something pushed me, just a little, and I went Dark."

He heard a sharp movement, and looked up. Joseph was shaking his head. "I will not let you lie to yourself," he said. "Those provocations were anything but little. The Minister trying to steal your magic. Your mother attempting to convince you that you should retreat with her to Godric's Hollow and never show your face outside it again. Bellatrix Lestrange cutting off your hand." Joseph cocked his head. "It is inhuman to expect yourself to retain control in those situations, Harry. At the same time, part of the reason that you lost control so badly was your usual tight restraint. Surely you can see that? That some relaxation on your part will soothe the problems and solve them for everybody?"

"What if I cause trouble?" Harry whispered. "What if something happens to make me hurt someone else?"

"And now you are playing with hypothetical situations," said Joseph. "With what your mother told you, and what you still believe at some level, that you could become a Dark Lord. Hypothetical situations are the last refuge of the coward, Harry. You know the truth. You've hidden from it for a long time now. You've wanted to dissolve the monitoring board, to let your magic loose and flowing free. And you've decided that those desires are somehow inhuman and the product of a twisted mind." His voice lowered and became, to Harry's ears, horribly tempting, coaxing. "If you would allow this freedom to anyone else, Harry, why not yourself? Why must the vates fear and distrust himself, while other wizards have complete confidence in their own thoughts and motives?"

Harry looked away.

"Harry?"

"There isn't an answer," Harry said at last, his voice breaking. "I—I was hiding from the fact that there's not an answer, that there was a contradiction in my reasoning, and that I didn't want to find that out."

It's more comfortable for me to be restrained and act within strict limits of what I can't and can do."

"I know that," said Joseph, and his voice had gone soft and compassionate. "But it's not healthy, Harry, not anymore." Harry could almost hear him fighting the temptation to add "if it ever was." Luckily, he successfully fought it. "You need to let yourself go more, for the sake of your magic and the sake of others, if you don't consider your own mental health a good enough cause. The world needs a vates, you've told me. But the world needs a happy and sane vates."

Harry slowly nodded. He still felt an enormous reluctance to do as Joseph said, given what could happen if he made the wrong decision and relaxed too many boundaries. But he could not stay like this. He had lost the ability to simply ignore the contradictions in his reasoning during his fourth year, he thought, when Vera saw the real reasons that he behaved as he did. He could refuse to examine them logically, but when they were brought out and paraded before his eyes, he had no choice but to change.

Joseph's arms curled around him. Harry tensed, then forced himself to loosen his muscles. I can start with this, he told himself. I can start with the fact that it makes other people feel good to hug me. Perhaps I can, in the end, accept that it might feel good to me, too.

"Now," Joseph said quietly in his ear. "I haven't asked for much commitment from you, Harry, other than to speak with me on a regular basis and think about what we discuss here. But I want you to carry this new understanding with you into the next meeting of the monitoring board, and see what happens."

Harry stirred unhappily, but didn't break out of Joseph's embrace. "Do I have to promise?"

"Yes. You do."

Harry swallowed. "Then I promise."

Something had changed. She needed no one to tell her it had. One learned to see these kinds of things for oneself, or one failed in politics—or found someone else leading one. Aurora smiled briefly, but, mostly, kept her eyes on Harry and tried to figure out the change.

He no longer walked as if he knew every path ahead, nor as if he had a hand out searching for someone to help and guide him. Instead, he moved like a child walking for the first time, terrified, but determined to do it. His eyes met hers, and Aurora saw them widen and then narrow, before Harry carefully looked away again. His face set into lines that she knew all too well, having looked at them in his guardian's face.

Aurora suffered the brief and terrible suspicion that, though neither Professor Snape nor the younger Mr. Malfoy was here, as she had asked, they were with Harry in spirit. Then she dismissed it as mere suspicion. Harry had shown his willingness to cooperate with the monitoring board. She would be acting against herself soon if she did not watch out.

"Harry," she said, with a brief, familiar nod to him. Most of the monitoring board was not yet there, only Madam Marchbanks, who turned the same kind of curious gaze on Harry that Aurora suspected she had used. Marchbanks's was much more obvious, though. "Is there something we can do for you? Any questions you wish to ask about the training in Light pureblood rituals, before the rest of the board arrives?"

"I came early because I wanted to speak to the two of you alone, actually." Harry ran his hand through his hair, and Aurora relaxed a bit. She knew that was his nervous gesture, and the shaky confidence he manifested was only a phantasm. Harry could not help but be himself, even when he tried otherwise. "I wished to ask Madam Marchbanks to take over the monitoring board."

Aurora felt the words catch in her throat, and she stared wildly at Harry.

Just for a moment, though. Then her backup plans fell into place, and she cocked her head and murmured, "That's very unfortunate, Harry.

Have I done something to displease you? You must know that many of the Light wizards are comfortable with me as the head of the monitoring board, and wish to do nothing to disrupt the arrangement.”

“I see no reason why they would balk at having Madam Marchbanks take over, Madam Whitestag, since she’s Declared Light.” Harry nodded at Marchbanks, who was watching him with narrowed eyes. “Provided that Madam Marchbanks agrees, of course.”

“I do,” said the old woman. Aurora restrained herself from giving her a glance of dislike, but it was a near thing. Marchbanks was necessary, she reminded herself. And at least Harry was not insisting that one of his Dark allies take the board—though he must have known that would not impress the Light wizards who ate out of Aurora’s hand.

“I would still like to hear a reason why,” said Aurora, and inflected her voice with hurt. “What have I done to merit such an extreme rejection, Harry?”

“Set your fellow Light wizards on me and mine like dogs.” Harry’s voice had no emotion. Aurora studied his face. His eyes were blank as fields of grass. “Lisa Addlington had orders to distract Draco, and provoke him to insure that I would agree to leave him out of the meetings in the future. Shadow had orders to attack Snape. You intended Marvin Gildgrace to draw out Narcissa, but she did not respond as you hoped.”

How did he—But of course. Legilimency. Aurora supposed she should have guessed Snape’s distraction during the prior meeting resulted from something more than just anger. If the reports of him were true, he would have grabbed his wand and cursed someone during the meeting, not just snapped ineffective insults in return for Shadow’s far more effective ones.

“Is this true, Aurora?”

And now Marchbanks were speaking as if she were horrified. Aurora barely restrained herself from rolling her eyes. As if she has not made her own political compromises in her time! And she dares to scold me for making sure that the monitoring board functions as it should.

"It is true," said Aurora. "So far as it goes. You misunderstood my intentions with those provocations, vates. I truly feel that Professor Snape and Draco Malfoy are not the best influences on you. They may try to draw you down into the Dark and make you behave more like them than someone undeclared should."

"Then you could have approached me with that conclusion." Harry's voice and eyes once again gave nothing away. Aurora found it unnerving. The free play of emotion belonged in his tone and on his face. "One of the traits of the Light is honesty, is it not, Mrs. Whitestag? But you did not. Instead, you tried to separate me from them. And they are my guardian and my partner. Whatever their allegiance, you had no right to coax them from my side."

Aurora bowed her head submissively. She did seem to have fucked this up. Perhaps, though, the situation was not lost. "Will you still permit me to remain on the monitoring board, vates?" she asked softly. "I hope I have convinced you how passionately I care about the future course of your education, and your future influence on the wizarding world. I simply have not used the best methods to show it."

Silence answered her. Aurora looked up and found Harry's eyes fixed on her. Now they spoke, but with intensity, more than any single and specific emotion. Aurora forced herself to be passive, and regard Harry with an eyebrow that inched higher and higher as the moments passed.

She didn't bother looking at Madam Marchbanks. The old woman was too fully on Harry's side. She would be aghast at the thought of letting Aurora remain.

But Aurora knew political reality, and Harry knew his own reality. And he would think she had to remain, so that he would have at least one person fully committed to stopping him, should the worst happen and he lose control.

"If you remain, Mrs. Whitestag," Harry said at last, "I will require an oath from you."

This is not the way it is supposed to be. But Aurora kept her face calm and attentive, with no more sign that this troubled her than the tilting of her head and lifting of her other eyebrow. "Yes?"

"An oath beyond the Alliance oaths," Harry said. "An oath that says you will act out of concern for my education and my influence on the future of the wizarding world, and not out of concern for your own political advancement."

This is impossible. Aurora made her face as regretful as possible. "I cannot do that, vates, unless others will swear the same oath."

She watched Harry watch her, his eyes the picture of a stag before the hunters. His legs did not tremble, and he did not have antlers, but she knew he was cornered. He would hesitate to press her with another vow only she had to swear, and would not presume to restrict her free will in such a way.

"No one else on the monitoring board tried to take my loved ones from me." Harry's voice was low, but very clear. "They all either truly wish me well, or were obeying your orders. Mrs. Whitestag, I will have this commitment from you, or I will have you gone from the monitoring board."

He could not dismiss her. He could not. Aurora had too many of the right ears beside her lips. She could whisper one word, and the Light alliance with Harry would sway like a flag in the wind. He must know that. He must know that she could call his bluff, and it would all crumble.

But he did not seem to know that. His eyes remained bright, implacable. And his shaky confidence had returned. He might jump off a cliff, Aurora realized, but he was taking her with him.

For long moments, the staring contest endured, and then Aurora bowed her head. Harry could not afford to lose her from the monitoring board, if only because he would want to keep her close and watch what she did, but neither could she afford to be away from him for that long. Harry would either convert her allies, or they would do something stupid enough, without her guidance, to get themselves

dismissed. And the Dark allies and Madam Marchbanks would close ranks against her, Aurora was certain. She would not be around to subtly influence people and remind them of what other alternatives than blindly following Harry vates existed.

“I shall swear that oath, Harry,” she said at last, and used more regret. “If you really think it necessary.”

"I do," said Harry.

He had no regrets, it seemed. Aurora, though irritated, had no choice but to draw her wand and swear by her magic and Merlin, while Harry watched her with those bright eyes. Then he leaned forward across the table, and included both her and Madam Marchbanks in his gaze.

“We should talk about how long the monitoring board’s period of supervision over me lasts,” he said.

Aurora concealed a groan. Who has done this to him?

I will learn, so that I can remove that influence from his life.

SS

Harry leaned against the telephone box outside of the Ministry and closed his eyes. He had used the Extabesco plene charm, so that anyone coming out could not see him. He was glad. He did not wish to be seen, and not for the usual reasons. He would present a picture of weakness just now, his face pale and damp with sweat, his legs shaking, his chest heaving as if he had run a mile.

And what had done it to him was something that few people would have found difficult. He had made Aurora Whitestag, who acted as an enemy to him even if she didn't mean to do so, step down as head of the monitoring board. He had made her reaffirm the commitments she said she had. He had argued the monitoring board's original determination to remain watching over him until he left Hogwarts down to the thirty-first of July next year, his seventeenth birthday and when he came of age. He had asserted legal rights that other people

probably thought were common sense, and would have asked for the first day.

He had done it. And people had frowned, and whined, and tried to guilt him, but they had gone along. No one had stormed out of the room. No one had done much more than ask him some slightly sly questions. No one had told him he was infringing on her free will and he should draw back.

He had asserted himself, and nothing had gone wrong, and no one had died.

Harry tucked his head into his shoulder, shivering as the sweat on his skin began to cool and dry. This hurt. He had escaped the shell of one kind of prison, but the newer and wider world was far more frightening. In lessons with Jing-Xi and conversations with Joseph, he at least understood the rules, even if he feared he had already broken them in one case and resented what was asked of him in the other.

But this.

This.

Harry shook, on the verge of a panic attack, until at last it passed, and then he took a deep breath and stood. Nothing had gone wrong for him, either, and he was still alive.

But he would have to do this again, and again, until at last he learned not to restrain himself unreasonably or hold himself to unreasonable standards.

It must happen.

He ran his hand through his sweat-damp hair, murmured a drying charm, and turned to Apparate back to Hogwarts. He did catch a glimpse of the lizard-tailed bird, sitting on the high wall of the alley and watching him with something like approval before it took flight, wings clattering invisibly across the sky.

Chapter Fifty-Two: A View In

Snape sat with his eyes closed and his face tilted upwards. He could only imagine what some of his students would say, could they see him now. He could imagine far better what some of his students in Slytherin House would say. They would see weakness, and where they saw weakness, they tended to attack actively or look for excuses to shunt one aside. Snape could imagine the contempt in Millicent Bulstrode's eyes, the word she would pass on quietly to her parents, and then the next time Snape went to a meeting of the monitoring board or met with the full Alliance of Sun and Shadow, Adalrico Bulstrode would be considering him carefully, looking for evidence of his unfitness to be Harry's guardian.

So he came outside and sat as Joseph had suggested he do early in the morning, accustoming himself to awareness of the world again long before anyone else would be awake to see his weakness. Currently, he sat beside the lake, and the sound of the water on the shore brought back old memories, as did the frosted grass beneath him—for now, the snow had melted and not returned, though it still lay in sullen slushy piles under the trees of the Forbidden Forest—and the bite in the air.

Do not think of them.

But Joseph had told him to come out here and think of them, and what time was Snape supposed to use for that, if not now? He concentrated, and drew up the memories. Chill water and chill air and chill grass that broke with a snap—or that might have been fragile ice. He was nine, and his mother had taken him to see a ditch filled with water for one of their lessons in the dirtiness and ugliness of the world.

This was the one time Snape could remember Eileen Prince's methods not working. She had meant to show him the dirt the water carried, he knew, and compare it to the muddy blood running in his veins. She had meant to impress on him the ugliness of steep brown banks, and water too choked to reflect the sky, and grass that had died or gone brown in the wake of autumn.

But the sun had shone that morning, and caught on small gleams in the water and the frost. That was what Snape remembered, an ugly scene rendered unexpectedly beautiful, half-holy, by the sunlight.

His face flushed as he thought about that. How he could have such thoughts? How could someone who had led the life he had call anything “holy” without mockery or irony?

But he had the thoughts, nonetheless, and he knew that, five months ago, he would not have considered the beauty of this memory at all. He would have concentrated on his mother’s words and blocked out the fact that, then, he had blocked them out, staring instead at the small miracle of water still running too fast to be frozen, autumn not yet surrendered to winter even though staring it in the eye.

Past and present mingled to the point where he was not surprised, and not even alarmed, to hear a step beside him. Of course his mother would be there. He turned his head and opened his eyes to greet her, certain that in this mood, not even she could make an impact on him.

It wasn’t Eileen Prince. It was Harry, sitting down beside Snape with a casual air, as though they shared sunrises by the lake all the time. He clasped his guardian’s hand and looked out over the water.

Snape studied him, and waited for questions to well to the surface. There were none. There was only a deep peace, which seemed to have as much of its origin in the quiet breaths Harry drew as it did in the sigh of the wind and the song of the water on edge of winter.

He turned his hand and clasped Harry’s fingers back. Harry gave him a quick, grateful glance, as though this were an incredible privilege, and hesitated for a long moment. Snape could feel him debating, though not what he was debating, and he didn’t think that he could have given an answer to it anyway, not with his own gulf of deep silence gripping and turning him.

Then Harry leaned his head on Snape’s shoulder and closed his eyes.

It was the gesture of a boy asking for protection, not the gesture of a strong protector sheltering a dependent, but Snape did not feel pressed upon, or as though he would prefer Harry to resume the role he had adopted out of necessity when Snape was feeling inadequate to the task of caring for him. Indeed, he felt a satisfaction as deep and quiet in its own way as the peace, and he wrapped his arm around Harry's shoulders.

Harry's breathing slowed and relaxed, as he lost whatever intangible nervousness had made him come out here in the first place. Snape turned his head and watched the sun's reflection shimmering in the water, dimmed but unconquered.

[illegible]

Owen lay on his bed, and stared at the ceiling, and cursed all idiots. It was better than taking his wand and cursing all the idiots.

Michael would be sulking on his bed in Ravenclaw, or perhaps talking to the Ravenclaws who still distrusted Harry and trying to find sympathizers. Owen hoped it was the former, for his brother's sake. The lightning bolt scar would bite him, according to the ritual they'd used to swear loyalty to Harry, if he tried to act against the Lord, or Lord-level wizard, he'd sworn to. Owen didn't know if the bite was literal or not. He didn't want to have to find out.

It would be best if Harry released him from the oath, but Michael had said he wanted to remain under it, to protect Draco's interests.

There's the other idiot. Owen had told himself again and again that his brother had behaved badly. He had known that Draco was their Lord's joined partner, and that no matter how Draco flirted or laughed, it was still a bad idea to flirt back, or follow him and moon after him, or let his feelings be known. One could do nothing about emotions, but one could control one's face and actions. And Michael had learned how to do that at Durmstrang, if not at home. So what had happened was Michael's fault as much as anyone's.

But the other half of the fault belonged to Draco. Draco had encouraged him. Draco had done things which the devoted partner of

a Lord never should have done. Sometimes Owen wished they were living in older and simpler times, or that Harry was a Lord who would strictly follow the ancient protocols, which called for the Lord's partner to swear a similar oath to a companion. Lords and Ladies were too important and rare to be distracted by the machinations of someone bored or jealous. A slow burning pain in one's hand, coupled with the loss of fingers if the partner persisted in acting like an idiot, tended to discourage both boredom and jealousy.

Harry would never do that, and that was one of the reasons Owen and Michael had chosen to swear to him in the first place—because Harry was also the kind of person who would come to Durmstrang and rescue children tortured under the auspices of another Lord, something most of the older rulers wouldn't do unless the other Lord was a personal enemy. Harry had accepted them, as he had accepted Draco, without trying to change any of them, and his patience and forbearance were gifts. Owen knew that.

But sometimes it was all so frustrating. And it looked as if he would have to solve this problem, since no one else would. Draco was smugly confident he was right. Harry held back, trying to give both Draco and Michael what they wanted. And Michael refused to divulge whatever had so shaken him a few days ago; Owen suspected it was because he didn't want to betray his beloved.

Beautiful and cruel. Michael had plenty of chances to fall in love with someone like that at Durmstrang, if he wanted. Did he have to wait until we arrived at Hogwarts?

Owen sat up, with a sigh, and laid his hand on the lightning bolt scar that cut across his left forearm. If he thought hard enough, he could know where Harry was. It wasn't something he used often, since he spent a great deal of his time in Harry's company anyway, and the effort left him with a headache. But he needed to find him now, and remain by his side until there was the chance of a private conversation. The contingent of seventh-year boys in Slytherin was small. Owen thought his room would remain empty for at least the next few hours, so he and Harry could talk.

Someone rapped on the door before he could sink properly into concentration. Owen frowned and stood. If it was one of the other blokes come back, he had rotten timing, but one of the other blokes wouldn't knock, so it was probably his twin. Then Owen would have to listen to Michael ranting on about how wonderful Draco was, or about how bitterly his illusion had been broken, and have his own sensible suggestions meet with silence.

He opened the door, and blinked. It was Harry.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. It was hard to keep himself from adding a title. Harry's magic blazed around him in a steady lightning storm, at least to Rosier-Henlin eyes, and lately the incandescence had grown brighter and brighter as he grew more confident and careless of his power. Owen thought it only proper that someone like that should be called Lord, or vates if he would not accept that word. It was the way things were done.

"Not with me," said Harry. He was still slightly shorter than Owen, but he stood and looked gravely into his eyes now, and he seemed to stand taller. "With your brother, and with Draco. I would appreciate your help on how to deal with them, so that someone will represent Michael's interests properly."

Owen blinked again, several times, and moved backward. "I didn't think you had noticed," he told Harry's shoulders, and then shook his head. He didn't mean to say things like that. His father had instructed him against damaging honesty. But Harry's magic changed things, made the air sharper and wilder. Opening his mouth seemed to have less adverse consequences then.

Harry turned around and gave him a small smile. "For most of the time, I didn't. But Michael had some reason to think he had hope of Draco, and he has a reason to avoid him as he's doing now. What are they?"

Owen sank to his bed in sheer relief. His vates had asked him a direct question. That meant Owen could tell the truth without betraying his brother.

Quietly, he told Harry about Draco's flirting, and then the incident he suspected had happened a few days ago, about which Michael refused to give any details. Owen himself thought it had to do with Draco's possession; Michael always had failed to think about what it meant that his beloved could control other people's bodies, just as he had, to Owen's mind, not thought through the implications of Harry's magic properly. Owen loved his twin dearly, but Michael had always been the baby brother, and not even the death of their father and the destruction of Durmstrang had changed that. He still had more of the boy who played at skillets with their mother than the hardened warrior within him.

Harry recognized that, Owen saw as he listened. He was, of course, an elder twin as well, and one trained to protect his younger brother—though he had been told to elevate Connor, while in Owen's case he had been told it was his duty because he was his father's magical heir, and stronger than Michael, and one duty of the magically powerful was to shelter those who were weaker. Owen should not have feared that Harry wouldn't understand.

He nodded when Owen was done, and said, "I'll talk to Draco, and make him apologize to Michael—properly. I also have a punishment in mind for him." He smiled grimly. "And then I'll release Michael from his oath. That may be dangerous, because it could mean that he'll attack me or Draco, but I would much rather see him free like that than bind him close."

"It will be better for him," said Owen at once. "He should not have taken that vow in the first place. He didn't really know what it meant."

Harry considered him, head tilted to the side. "What about you, Owen? Will it hurt you, to know that your brother and I are essentially on opposite sides?"

Owen bowed his head. "I am Michael's brother," he said. "And I am your sworn companion and the head of the Rosier-Henlin family. Those two allegiances to proper courtesy and custom pull against the other."

Harry smiled. "Thank you, Owen."

“You did that on purpose,” said Harry, his voice even and low. “I can understand your wanting to be admired, Draco. Most of us do.” But not you, Draco thought, half in a rage, mourning, and not for the first time, the lack of that common link that would have made Harry understand this so much better. “But flirting with someone you knew couldn’t really respond to you, since you’re closer to me than he is, and you have a commitment to me in the form of a joining ritual—why did you do that?”

Draco tried a few times to answer, but his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He had just clearly seen the emotion in Harry’s eyes for the first time. It wasn’t anger, which he had expected and prepared to weather.

It was disappointment.

Harry looked at Draco as if he had left him alone in a perfectly neat room and come back to find that Draco had destroyed it. His eyes were weary. This, too, would pass, his stance said, of course it would, but he could wish that Draco had done something more productive with his time than create a mess he would have to clean up.

“I wanted to make you jealous, a little,” Draco whispered. “And he was there, and already obsessed with me, and willing to give me the stares I craved. I saw no reason not to take advantage of that.”

He’d done what a good Slytherin would do. He’d done what a neglected boyfriend would do. Why did he feel so bad now?

“I could have understood that perfectly if you were a normal adolescent,” Harry said. “But, for better or worse, this is more like a court, Draco. I’ve had to grow up lately, and realize that I was hiding from my responsibilities and some of the implications of Lord-level power. I think you need to realize what it means when you flirt with someone else, what can happen, what kinds of destruction it might encourage. What if Michael had grown so angry during the rebellion that he betrayed us to the Ministry, for example?”

“He wouldn’t have done that—“

“Are you so sure?”

Draco frowned and studied the ground, uncomfortable. No, he wasn't sure, damn it. Michael was sworn to Harry, but there were ways around a sworn companion's oath, especially if he managed to convince himself that he was doing it for Harry's own good. And some people in Woodhouse, especially those werewolves who resented their condition fiercely, might have listened to him if he sought for allies.

He had thought he knew Michael. But he hadn't known that Michael's obsession for him would grow.

What other things did I miss?

And then shame sank its claws into him, because dancing with and defeating those too weak to know any better was one thing, and not anticipating the waltz of another and making himself look like a fool was another. Draco felt his cheeks heat up. This was wrong, if only because of its consequences. Yes, hindsight was perfect, but his foresight needed to be perfect, too, as much as it could be. He knew Harry would forgive mistakes, unlike his father. If he had gone to Harry the moment he realized something was wrong, then he could have avoided this. Or he should have guessed the consequences and never started this.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered.

Harry didn't say anything. Draco looked up to see that Harry had waved his hand, and letters of fire were stitching themselves across the air.

You'll be apologizing to Michael, and not just to me. I'll be keeping silent and away from you for two days, one for the original flirting you did and one for the possession of Michael.

“Why?” Draco demanded.

Your punishment. There's not much that I can do to punish you as you acted, Draco, since I'll hardly be flirting with someone else. But I

can and will refuse to share myself with you for that little while. It's two days, and then it ends, and then we'll put this aside. I only hope Michael can do so as easily, once he's released from his oath.

Harry half-closed his eyes, and then Draco felt as if a glass barrier had descended in front of him. It took him a short time to realize what it cut off. He could no longer sense Harry's magic, nor hear his breathing, nor feel the warmth of his skin.

"Harry," he said, and knew his voice sounded desperate.

Harry gave him one more of those disappointed glances, and turned away. Draco tried to reach after him, and his hand halted an inch from Harry's shoulder, refusing to move any further.

"How long does this last?" Draco whispered. "Two full days, or forty-eight hours from this moment?"

Forty-eight hours from this moment.

Draco swallowed, glad that he would not have to sleep alone more than two nights, but dreading the thought of those he would, and dropped his hand. Harry nodded at him and walked away.

He started to turn away himself, but Owen Rosier-Henlin stepped up to him then and clapped him on the back. Draco eyed him warily.

"I've come to conduct you to my brother, and make sure you've properly apologized," Owen explained.

Draco concealed a groan, and stifled the urge to turn his head and watch Harry go. He had not expected Harry's absence to tear at him so much. They had spent long hours apart in the past few days, after all.

But that was different, because he had always known that he could go to and touch Harry as much as he wanted to if he became bored or lonely.

He followed Owen along dully, hoping Harry wouldn't choose to use this punishment often. It was horrible.

Of course, perhaps he wouldn't have to if Draco didn't do things deserving of it, either. Draco concealed his flinch and his frown, and decided he could try to act a little better. Sometimes.

[illegible]

The wards around the Manor were all relaxed. His wand lay on the table, a good distance from him. The auditory glamour around him, which concealed the voices from Narcissa's spell that continued to murmur and natter on about the states of his emotions, was thick and tight. Lucius sat back in his chair and nodded to the house elf next to him, who bowed and vanished.

He looked up when he heard the light footstep cross the threshold of the study; with the wards down, he had no way of hearing or seeing her before she arrived. Narcissa paused when she saw him, her head high and her blonde hair curling around her neck. Her eyes were placid as a lake in winter.

Lucius inclined his head slightly. “Welcome, Narcissa.”

His non-use of a pet name would not go unremarked, he knew. Narcissa sat down on the padded bench placed at the far end of the room, a safe distance from him. Besides the distance, it provided a straight flight of escape out the door, while Lucius sat in a corner between bookshelves, hemmed in if he tried to dodge. With many visitors, such small disadvantages would not have hurt him, but Narcissa was too nearly his equal for them not to matter. Lucius knew it, and she knew it, and he knew she knew it, and she knew he knew she knew it.

They regarded each other in silence for a long time, before Narcissa stirred and asked, “Have you decided to repent yet, Lucius?”

The term repentance would have galled him. In some corner of his soul, it did still. But Lucius had prepared carefully for this meeting. He needed to handle Narcissa differently than either of those rash and

impulsive boys. Narcissa had much less to lose from his antagonism, and she had agreed to a meeting whilst neither Harry nor Draco would come near him.

“For not telling you beforehand? Yes, of that I repented long ago. For asking you to come here? I do not see that I need to.” Lucius paused, studying her. Narcissa shone in the sunlight through the study window as if she were made of glass. He found that he was very glad to look at her, as he had not been glad in a long time. She was beautiful, and the house had been without her too long. Two months was two lifetimes too long. “For fighting with you?” he added softly. “I cannot be, my beautiful one. We have not fought in too long.”

He saw an answering spark, almost unwilling, in her eyes. She would know, as he did, that the last duel that had been that serious between them was when Lucius had wanted her to take the Dark Mark. She had won that one, and given how mad Voldemort was when he returned, she was right. She would be wondering at the insinuation that she was also right this time.

Lucius did not think she was. But with Narcissa, he could be almost honest, certainly closer than he came to honesty with anyone else. He knew her strengths, her weaknesses, her defenses against those weaknesses, and she knew his. They had spent long years coiled together like two drowsing serpents.

It was not deception when another serpent offered a show of its lovely scales to the other. The second snake must be wise enough to know the fangs were still there.

“I will not be returning to Malfoy Manor at this time,” Narcissa announced, as they moved through several silent steps of a dance conducted by the expressions on faces and the minute gestures of the body.

Lucius inclined his head.

“I will come again on Midwinter’s Day,” Narcissa added, standing. “It is appropriate that we should be present at Draco’s Declaration to the Dark, whatever our personal feelings on the matter are.”

Lucius concealed his shock and dismay deep. He had not known Draco was Declaring. He had not thought it possible when Draco received the gift of empathy from Julia Malfoy, and he had never known how much that gift had altered. That was a weakness that Draco, of course, had never revealed to his father.

"I will await you then," he said, and tilted his head to the side so that she could see his throat and his collarbone.

Narcissa waved her wand, and tried to dismiss the glamour that hid the voices speaking about the state of his emotions. Lucius had made it too strong for such a simple spell, though, and the room around them stayed silent. Narcissa's lips curved in a small smile, and she made him a tiny curtsy, hands dropping her robes almost before they gathered them.

"I do hope that you provide interesting company on the twenty-first, my dear husband," she murmured, and turned for the door.

Lucius let her depart before he went to the bookshelves. He would use the ancient texts and his knowledge of Draco's mind to guess what ritual he would use to Declare to the Dark.

He was confident he could guess, and turn it to his advantage. Draco was yet a snakeling with fangs, not a serpent full-grown.

[illegible]

“And Harry, if you would.”

Peter watched closely as Harry came to the front of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and stood patiently waiting. His magic was a good deal calmer than Peter had seen it in a week, and he glanced about now and then as if wondering why in the world people stared at him. It was amazing, Peter thought, how quickly one got used to the lack of a left hand at his side; his Levitation Charm compensated well enough for that.

“Now,” Peter said, “this particular lesson is in skill and creativity on the battlefield. Varying a spell can cause an enemy much more trouble than casting one he doesn’t know.” He saw a hand move from the corner of his eye, and turned his head. Skills he’d developed as a spying Death Eater helped him notice the kinds of subtle signals that a teacher needed to recognize. “Yes, Miss Granger?”

“Professor Pettigrew,” she said, lowering her hand and frowning at him, “how can that be? If you throw a spell at an enemy that he doesn’t know, wouldn’t that mean that he couldn’t grasp what would happen next? It might make his shield explode for all he knows.”

“There is that,” Peter acknowledged calmly. “But a variation of a spell he knows well can produce overconfidence, you see. He will not seek to fight you because he thinks he knows the effects.” He watched Hermione’s mouth widen in an O of understanding, then nodded at her and turned to Harry. “Would you care to demonstrate one of the modifications on a spell you know, Harry?”

Harry studied him back. His eyes asked as clearly as words could, “You’re sure that you want my magic at full strength?”

Peter inclined his head a tiny bit. Harry visibly took a breath and stood up straighter, extending his hand in front of him. He probably should have brought his wand so he could practice the movements for the rest of the class, Peter thought critically, but Harry rarely carried it any more.

At least he did say the spell aloud, instead of thinking it. Peter had started them on nonverbal spells, but he wasn’t going to try that with a variation the first time off. “*Praestigiae*,” Harry said, enunciating the word on the first syllable instead of the second.

Peter observed in interest as several misty gray balls formed in the air and began to whirl around each other. The spell usually produced an illusion, but adding a second word to the end of the incantation often specified what sort of illusion the caster wanted. Peter suspected that Harry had left off that second word on purpose, and also played on another meaning of the Latin word, that of juggling.

The balls gained speed and focus, and Peter realized each one spun on a brilliant white axis, going so fast that it seemed as if the gray should dissipate in every direction. But that didn't happen. Instead, the white axis sharpened and brightened, spearing into lightning, cracking in half in front of Peter's eyes. Beyond lay a wide green vision that split open to reveal a deep blue one, and beyond that—

Abruptly, the visions vanished. Peter blinked and shook his head, and turned to see Harry looking rather embarrassed.

"Er, sorry, sir," he said. "I didn't mean to enchant you and the others like that. I let my magic go too much."

Peter acted at once. Harry was finally permitting his power to stretch its wings, and achieving a balance between uncontrolled danger and the kind of restraint he'd practiced lately, which made Peter want to shake him. He would not let Harry become mortified that his incantation had worked too well and shut his magic up again.

"That did exactly as it was supposed to do, Harry," he said firmly. "Bewilder and hypnotize an enemy, correct?"

Harry peered at him from beneath one black lock of hair, as if wondering when the axe would fall, and nodded slowly.

"While the regular *Praestigiae* simply creates illusions that may or may not baffle a foe, depending on how good they are, correct?" Peter drilled him. He could see Hermione and several of the other students scribbling down notes on their parchments.

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

"A useful variation," said Peter. "And exactly what I asked you to do. Ten points to Slytherin, Harry. Please do sit down."

Harry retreated to his seat looking somewhat puzzled, but the puzzlement turned to consideration as he sat there. Peter hoped he was thinking. His magic had hurt no one, and if anyone felt humiliated about how easily Harry had bound them, at least they only needed to

“The use of the two proceeds apace,” he announced aloud. “I will require you to make ready for the first test soon. Fetch Odi et Amo again, and read me the eleventh chapter.”

“Yes, my lord,” Indigena murmured respectfully, and went to fetch the book.

Lord Voldemort directed his snake to stare at the ceiling of his earthen refuge and, very slightly, smiled. Soon he would leave this place and travel to the one that had been prepared for him. With the hand he could wield, he would have enough magic to protect him and keep him safe during the journey.

And then he would commence his new war.

Harry Potter was not only the one marked to defeat him. He was not only a personal enemy who had stolen thirteen years of Voldemort’s life, lost to bodiless suffering and pain. He was also the one who had hurt Voldemort so deeply that what Albus Dumbledore had done to him looked like the fumbblings of a hedge wizard.

Lord Voldemort was still going to live forever. He was still going to conquer the wizarding world and rid it of the taint of Mudbloods forever.

But first, he would destroy Harry Potter.

It would be done carefully. Simply killing him would be too easy, as would torture of those he was close to. The tortures had to be different from each other, or at least sufficiently different to punish Harry. And Lord Voldemort must be careful, must be precise, must strip from Harry all that he had loved, which in the end would include his magic and his morals and his sanity.

He would have to think on this. He had time.

He would always, he thought, caressing the cup, have time.

Chapter Fifty-Three: Vengeance Lies Dreaming

“Come and look at this article, Pemberley.”

Honorio rolled her eyes as she gathered up her robes to pick her way in among the presses. No matter how long she spent at the Maenad Press, Dionysus Hornblower refused to call her by anything but her last name. He seemed to change his mind on her daily. Now she was the liaison with the press Harry had assigned her to be, now she was a spy from the cause of an underground rebellion and the Press’s ally, now she was a spy from a vates who had sold his cause out by cooperating with Light wizards for the sake of a legal authority Dionysus cared for less than spots on bread. Life was never boring, but sometimes Honorio wished it wouldn’t vary quite so much.

His refusal to call me by my name should be refreshing, perhaps, as the one constant, she thought, as she finally hopped over a discarded piece of metal and came down beside Dionysus, who thrust an article impatiently at her.

Honorio took it up carefully. It was written on fine parchment, which argued against it coming from a student at Hogwarts; so did the accurate spelling. But many pureblood families had parchment like this in the house. Honorio did not see how she was supposed to tell anything about the article from that.

“The content, girl, the content,” said Dionysus.

She read the article, and stifled her complaint against the only other “name” that he ever called her. Mad-Eye Moody had been the same, and Honorio had liked him well enough, though she thought he needed to relax and learn how to dance. And at least Dionysus had not decided to announce her stupidity to the press at large today, as he had a habit of doing.

DEPARTMENT OF MYSTERIES ‘UNSPEAKABLE’ IN ITS LOYALTIES

It didn’t look any different from the articles they printed almost daily—except, Honorio thought as she read on, for the tone, measured and

assured, without the half-hysteria that permeated most stories about Harry's treachery or the Ministry's treachery or the werewolves' treachery or Voldemort's treachery. The Vox Populi was very fond of treachery, usually.

This article outlined a story of the founding of the Department of Mysteries that Honoria had never heard before, beginning with the Stone and arguing that, pretense or not, the Unspeakables still served the Stone and not the Ministry. Some were things that she thought Dionysus couldn't have known, either, given how early his "training" in the ways of the Unspeakables had finished. The article-writer concluded with a few sentences that made the hair on Honoria's arms stand up.

For now, when they must fly against public outrage and loss of face, the Department of Mysteries is quiet. But it will not remain so for long. If we do not stand on our guard, they will return, filtering into our dreams, turning our very shadows on the walls against us. Maintaining the amount of light shed on them is the only way to harness them and their Stone, to negotiate rather than face them in a hopeless all-out war.

Honoria lowered the parchment and rubbed absently at the gooseflesh on her arms. She blinked as she caught a glimpse of Dionysus's scowling face. "What?" she asked. "You love this."

"But I know who it's from." Dionysus regarded the article with a jaundiced eye. "Our readers won't know, of course, since we print without names, and I've never let a story's origin disturb me before. But."

"But?" Honoria prompted.

"This one's from Scrimgeour." Dionysus all but snarled the word, and then met her eyes as if daring her to challenge him.

Honoria blinked, and had the urge to laugh. She supposed that the day would, of course, come when the Minister would seek to use the Vox Populi to express his opinion. Everyone else did. She would

never have thought that Dionysus, champion of freedom and the rights of everyone to speak, would balk, though.

“And so?” she asked gently. “You know that he can write these articles and send them to you, too. And he certainly has the spelling and the writing skills to be accepted.” The only articles that Dionysus tended to reject out of hand were the ones so badly-written it was impossible to say what the author had meant.

“He’s an enemy of freedom.” Dionysus turned his head upside-down, watching the article from the corner of one eye as though it would burst into flames if he regarded it directly for too long. “What would your vates say about this, Pemberley? Since I consider him the champion of freedom.”

Only when it suits you to do so. “He would say that you should print the article,” said Honoria, and gave it back to Dionysus. “If the Minister is planning treachery, then it should be outweighed by the fact that other voices in the same edition of the Populi speak against him. And you know that Harry always gives his enemies a chance to have their say, even to his own detriment.”

“Then he uses them to gain power,” said Dionysus, but absently, showing off his inconsistent philosophical position for the day. He went on staring at the story, and refused to take it from her hand. “What if it’s a code? I print it, and it tells someone to attack the Maenad Press, or gives other information damaging to the cause of freedom?”

Honoria refrained from rolling her eyes, but with a very great effort. “Change the wording a bit.”

“I can’t do that! Not to something I’ve agreed to print.”

“Then don’t print it.” Honoria shrugged. Dionysus’s paranoia had kept him alive, but it was tiresome to deal with. “I’m knackered. Going home to be with Ignifer for a time.” She turned to grow wings and rise out of the mass of the press. She hadn’t used her Animagus form to reach Dionysus mostly because there was so little room for her to

change back from gull to human in the crowded mess of the floor where they stood.

Dionysus caught her shoulder, and he was heavy enough that it was hard to dislodge him. “You won’t consider writing that exposé I wanted?”

“No,” said Honoria, with finality. Dionysus had wanted her to write an article on what it was like to live with an exiled Apollonis, or, alternatively, a Light witch turned Dark. Honoria had her own reasons for refusing, but those wouldn’t content him. She had to find ones that would. “That plays too much on Ignifer’s blood status, and makes everyone think all over again that purebloods are special and worth more than other people. You don’t want to undermine the Grand Unified Theory like that, do you?” The one wind that remained constant in Dionysus’s character, or had so far, was the Grand Unified Theory.

His shoulders stiffened. "Of course not." He released her with a faint push. "Go home to your lover. Sarah!"

Honorina transformed and soared upward. She was nearly out of the building when she remembered she hadn't had her joke yet today, and wheeled back to lift her tail discreetly over the machinery of a press. The magic that drove it could cope with most failures, but they hadn't yet figured out a spell that would get rid of all the problems bird-shit caused.

Thus fortified to come back tomorrow and enjoy her task, Honoria merrily flitted out of a window and was gone.

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Ignifer was in the extraordinarily odd position of talking with her father for the first time since he had cursed her with infertility and not being furious at him. She sat stiffly in front of the fire, hands clasped before her, and watched Cupressus with a keen eye through the flames. He crouched with his head poking through them. That alone was impossible enough to earn Ignifer's attention. Cupressus Apollonis

never made a gesture that could be interpreted as submissive to anyone. Ever.

“And that was the end of it,” Cupressus concluded. “The Unspeakables threatened to publish what I’d done in the past, specifically in my foolish youth.” His slow glance said that he might consider foolish youth to extend to thirty-six. Ignifer ignored those implications, and just nodded. “I told them they were welcome to do so, but I would know what direction the attacks came from, and I was not yielding my time or my treasures to them to do with as they would.” He sat back, looking pleased with himself, and added, “Some others were not so lucky as to avoid that trap. Or they went seeking them out, as if one wanted the Department of Mysteries to engage with.”

Ignifer tilted her head. She knew that tone in her father’s voice. He had specific information, in this case names, and he would give it up if he was given something in return. And once again she felt the temptation to bargain with him.

Don’t, the voice of experience told her. His bargains are iron chains that only slowly fade into being around your limbs.

But this time, she had protection, while all the other times she had faced him alone and crippled by the terrible yearning to return home, not to be an exile any longer. She had Harry, and the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, and their shelter even if her father tried to hurt her.

She asked, carefully, “Would the names of these unlucky or foolish ones be common news?”

“Not common news,” said Cupressus. “One is often watched in Ireland, because of his importance, but no one would guess that he was so unfortunate as to misstep. The other is shining brighter, but passing beneath the shade of the Unspeakables could well dim his light forever.”

The only thing that told Ignifer was that the unlucky one was an important pureblood wizard, and the other a Light pureblood wizard on the rise, not necessarily important. But pursuing this line of attack

would win her a collar about the throat. She adopted an expression of indifference. "And they are proclaiming their failures?"

Cupressus laughed quietly. "Oh, daughter, everyone proclaims his failures, if one only knows how to look. And read."

Ignifer gnawed her lip a moment, trying to find her way through the strands of the discussion. An important pureblood wizard who had slipped up. What Cupressus was implying could mean that the consequences of his failure had been announced in the Daily Prophet, but most readers wouldn't know the nature of his folly.

And then she blinked, because there was only one wizard who fit that description, and, somewhat to Ignifer's own shock, she was involved enough in politics now to know who it was.

She didn't blurt it out to her father, of course. She nodded to Cupressus and said, "I appreciate your willingness to share this knowledge with me, Father, and I salute your resistance to unspeakable designs on your home and property."

"You might have the right to speak their names, again, in the future," said Cupressus softly.

Ignifer didn't react. Her father had told her again and again what price would win her back her home and her family and his approval. She only had to Declare for Light, and she would receive everything she wanted.

Was it stubbornness that kept me Dark for so long, or honor? Well, it is honor now. I won't abandon my allegiance in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, the allegiance that lets me sit on the monitoring board, the allegiance that means I can obtain what I want from my life instead of what my father wants.

"As soon hope for a change of voice, as a change of name," she told her father, and then dismissed the flames. Cupressus would only offer some savage or ironic farewell. Ignifer saw no need to entertain either.

The moment the flames ended, she cupped her hands around her cheeks and bowed her head. Her stomach was sick with nervousness, churning as if she would vomit at any moment.

Only one wizard fit Cupressus's description, and if he was right—and he might not be right, Ignifer tried to tell herself, again and again—then that wizard had been conspiring with the Unspeakables right under Harry's nose.

Lucius Malfoy.

He had publicly broken with Harry, but almost no one knew why. Ignifer had to admit she'd doubted it was over the disownment of his son. After all, what reason did he have to dissuade his son from going to Harry? He was Harry's joined partner, or would be, and using a ritual that required a level of will and commitment that most parents approved of. Lucius Malfoy was simply too practical to disown Draco in a fit of pique, or because Draco had disobeyed some whim of his. He would need a compelling reason, and an entanglement with Unspeakables through which he hoped to escape blackmail would fit.

If it was what her father suggested, then Lucius had not only betrayed the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, but he had more personally and permanently betrayed Harry. The Unspeakables had tried to control Harry. They had tried to compel a wizard. Lucius cooperating with them stated that he did not believe in the very ideals he claimed to support.

Ignifer tried to pull her rampant speculation up short. This might have been the very track her father intended to set her mind running along. She really had no proof, other than her father's word, and the odd coincidence of Lucius breaking from Harry for some reason no one knew the full tale of, and her own conviction that Lucius was slimy enough to do something like this. For all she knew, Cupressus wanted her to become Lucius's enemy to advance his own agenda.

Of course it's to advance his own agenda. Ignifer wiped at her cheeks and tried to calm her breathing. It always is. And he may want me to suspect and accuse Lucius, and fracture the Alliance further, or weaken Lucius's place with Harry. He is Lucius's enemy by

allegiance. He could want to see Lucius destroyed just because he's a Dark wizard. I don't know anything yet.

But the suspicion sank into her stomach and gathered force, if only because Cupressus had been right about odd things before. He had predicted long years before it happened that Cornelius Fudge would become Minister, and that he would be weak and contemptible enough to need the "advice" of prominent Light families, while fearing the Dark ones enough not to seek comfort from them. And he tended not to make statements without some kind of proof behind them. Lucius was really the only candidate who fit his parameters this time, no matter how Ignifer turned them in her mind.

A door banged, and Honoria's voice called out, cheerfully, "Ignifer? Are you—" Then she entered the room and crossed it in a soft run. Her arms locked around Ignifer's waist, and when Ignifer looked up, illusions of lions juggled tiny balls on her shoulders. Ignifer cracked a reluctant smile.

"Who did this to you?" Honoria whispered, stroking her hair. "The bitch or the bastard?"

The descriptions of her parents made Ignifer chuckle, and then feel bad for chuckling. If her father was trying to help—but then, she did not know if he really was, and he could intend to help the Alliance purely and solely because it would benefit him. She didn't know, couldn't know, and keeping the suspicions locked in her own skull was making her nervous and jumpy.

She licked her lips and did what she usually did at such a time: told Honoria.

Honoria went more and more still as Ignifer listed the reasons she had for thinking Lucius had been involved with the Unspeakables, and the reasons she had for not believing Cupressus. At the end, Honoria jumped away and flung her arms into the air, swearing. The illusions of flames sprang out, crackling around her fingers.

"Fuck," she said, when other, and more eloquent, terms had deserted her. "There's no way that we can move against this, either. Not easily."

If we accuse Lucius falsely, then we'll lose credibility and cost Harry two of his best allies, and practically compel him to give Lucius a second look and another hearing. If we turn out to be correct, then it could still split the Alliance and put Harry in a very difficult position. Is he going to be able to eat the magic out of his father-in-law?"

"I don't know," said Ignifer, and she didn't. She had held firm to her own promises, even when they cost her with her family, but that had cost her, too, hardening her pride into a bitter, hollow shell. She had also had longer than Harry had been alive to consider her position, and she'd had people she despised begging her to reconsider her choice. Nothing fortified the will like open attacks from the opposition. No matter which principles Harry ultimately chose to support, those of justice or those of mercy, he would have people he loved and cared for on both sides, not scorned.

"It's not a good idea to tell him just yet, maybe," said Honoria. "Not until we have more proof." She paused for a long moment, and a slow, manic, brilliant smile crept across her face.

"What?" Ignifer asked.

"Minister Scrimgeour sent an article decrying the Unspeakables to the Populi today," said Honoria, and sat down on another chair, swinging her foot. "I convinced Dionysus to print it. We could send news of Lucius's possible treachery to Scrimgeour, since we know that he distrusts the Department of Mysteries. He could look around for clues to it, and he has a much better spy network than we ever will."

Ignifer smiled. She knew the Minister didn't like Lucius Malfoy. Honoria's solution was as close to perfect as it could get. At least they would know someone was working on the problem, and someone with much better resources to handle any eventual discovery—and, best of all, someone without the Alliance of Sun and Shadow oaths hindering him. "You're brilliant."

Honoria tossed her head in pretended pique. "I'm radiant, I'll have you know."

Rufus eyed the note lying in the middle of his desk as if it were a Many cobra. Actually, a Many hive would be less troublesome, since all of them in Britain seemed to work for Harry. The note was from Ignifer Apollonis and her lover, explaining that they had reason to believe Lucius Malfoy had interfered in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow by cooperating with the Unspeakables, and could he look into this?

Nothing would have delighted Rufus more a year ago. Now, he assuredly could not look into this, because the Unbreakable Vows he'd sworn in Courtroom Ten bound him from betraying Lucius in any way.

He had sent Percy off for tea when he first read the note, so that he could throw things at the walls in peace.

The man's words made so much sense in this context, he thought bitterly. Lucius had spoken of not getting everything he wanted when he first appeared with Flint and swore the oaths. And he hadn't, had he? The Unspeakables hadn't managed to control Harry or prevent the rebellion from happening, and Lucius had broken with Harry when the rebellion began, so Rufus rather thought his motivation traced to that. He had not thought to give Lucius's words that particular spin, and so that meant he was sitting hand-bound in his office and Lucius was walking around the roads of the wizarding world free to do as he pleased.

It pained Rufus.

He wished there was a way that he could give the note to someone else and let that person investigate Lucius. Wilmot would be perfect. He had told Rufus, quietly, a few days after the anti-werewolf laws were repealed, what he was, and the only questions Rufus had been able to ask in his astonishment had been how he managed during the full moons and why he had never noticed before. He was loyal to the Minister and Harry—somehow both at the same time—and he was discreet. He could look for proof of Lucius's treachery without blaring his intention all over the front page of the Daily Prophet.

But even giving the note to someone else would be a betrayal of Lucius; he could feel the Unbreakable Vow tightening like a noose on his throat just thinking of it. Rufus shook his head and crumpled the parchment up. The tightening eased. If Honoria or Ignifer asked about the progress of the investigation, then Rufus would simply have to say that he had been unable to find proof, which was true enough.

Would Lucius go on from this to act against Harry again? Rufus did not doubt it. Lucius had broken his ties with the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, to hear the Vox Populi announce it. And his own Unbreakable Vows bound him from action against the Minister, not against the vates.

Rufus's only comfort was the fact that his article for the Vox Populi separated him firmly from the Unspeakables, and thus from whatever Lucius's activities for them had been. At least that particular association, of blind belief in and support for the Department of Mysteries, did not taint him.

SS

Lucius tapped his fingers rapidly against his knee as he read the description of the Declaration ritual on page 363 of *Declaring for Children*. Then he shook his head. He could not see Draco choosing that particular ritual. Not only was it demanding, long, and bloody, but it involved an element of dominance that Lucius did not believe his son capable of achieving, given what must happen after the ritual. No, Draco would find a ritual that let him preserve his purity in the eyes of his partner.

Lucius felt another lash of irritation at the thought of Harry. If Harry had only done as he was supposed to, and reacted to Hawthorn Parkinson's imprisonment by means less extreme than rebelling, then Draco's disownment would not have happened. Lucius would know what ritual his son was using to Declare, and he would have been able to influence him by subtle suggestions.

Neither boy had responded to his letter indicating that he wanted to reconcile. Lucius counseled himself, again, to patience. It would take more work than that to earn back Harry's trust, and Draco's. It would

take months of perfect good behavior, and even cringing submission if necessary.

He did not like cringing submission. But he had done it for the Dark Lord, when he still believed the man might give him gifts beyond the brand on his arm.

Lucius scratched the Dark Mark absently. Several times in the last week he had awakened from rough dreams to find it tingling, and, once, when he peered at the snake and skull by the light of the moon, surrounded with red lines. Lucius had cast several spells on it, trying to determine whether the Dark Lord was reaching out across the miles to influence him, but the spells had revealed nothing. The tingling had ceased now. And though Lucius had analyzed his dreams, he could not find any way in which they would be useful to Voldemort. They were memories, of times when he had punished his enemies, or future hopes, such as what would happen when he finally disproved the Grand Unified Theory and put the Mudbloods in their proper places. He often had such dreams. Voldemort had not changed them in any way, had not planted visions in his head as Lucius knew he had often done to Harry.

The thought of the Grand Unified Theory reminded him that he had long meant to issue a certain invitation. He spent a pleasant few minutes composing a letter to Thomas Rhangnara, inviting him to come to the Manor. He would like to discuss the implications of the Grand Unified Theory on the heritage of the Malfoys and Blacks.

The letter sent with Julius, Lucius turned and drew another book down from the shelves. Somewhere, he would find a match for Draco's temperament and goals. He would know that was the ritual his son was using, and he would be prepared to use it when he went to Hogwarts on Midwinter's Eve.

He would never attempt to change the force of his son's Declaration to the Light, of course; the ritual would prevent such outright interference in any case, and on the longest night of the year, the wild Dark was likely to kill the wizard who tried something so foolish. No, what Lucius would do was—minor, really. A suggestion here, a tweak

Humming happily, Connor went to enchant the wooden broom and Snitch and chase them around the Pitch on his Nimbus. If he saw Harry along the way, he would ask him if he wanted to play. Harry was spending an awful lot of time without Draco these days, even though Draco's punishment for being a right git to Michael was long over.

[illegible]

Draco took a deep, bracing breath. He stood on top of the Astronomy Tower, lingering behind after his NEWT Astronomy class had departed below. Professor Sinistra had given him an understanding look when he asked if he could stay. She knew how much he loved the stars, and she would think this another opportunity for watching them.

It wasn't, though. It was about listening, instead. This high, and this close to Midwinter, Draco could hear the cry of the wild Dark as it swept through the black spaces between the constellations, hunting down the Light. The day was near when it would land and bite the year in half, proclaiming its power with a thunderous roar that Draco thought even Muggles might hear, if they would only listen.

His vision swam with stars during the day, and with blackness at night. He could feel the wind tugging on his heart, trying to make him follow it into the sky. Draco resisted that—he would not lose himself that far—but he could admire the savage beauty of the wild Dark.

If it were not presumptuous, he would say that the tone and temper of the wild Dark this year was much like his own, or at least as he perceived himself: beautiful, cruel, cold, indifferent to attempts others made to crack that coldness.

That observation, at least, was the thing that had made him rethink his behavior with Michael, and resolve not to do anything like it again. It was beneath him. He would watch out for threats, he would battle them, and he would work for his own advantage, but indulging himself with vengeance was undignified. Draco wondered that his father had

ever thought it a good idea. A cool insult or quiet application to Harry to take care of the problem worked much better.

Draco felt his smile widen as he traced his eyes from star to star, almost seeing the thing blacker than the blackness that danced between them.

He had no objection to riding on Harry's power when he couldn't do something for himself. If he knew who and what he was, what others thought did not matter, and remaining in Harry's shadow, at least to their perceptions, would just encourage more people to underestimate him.

But on Midwinter, at least, it would be his night. He had chosen a ritual to Declare to the Dark that he rather thought would surprise everyone who witnessed it.

And it would certainly surprise Harry, and serve as Draco's answer to those two days of punishment when he hadn't been able to touch him or feel his magic.

Watch out, Harry. You're about to find out what it's like to have a Dark lover, Dark in heart and soul as well as in magic.

Chapter Fifty-Four: His Night

Harry came in late to breakfast that day, but he was already feeling smug about what he'd accomplished so far. A letter to Camellia to let her know he would spend his Christmas Day at Silver-Mirror, after a few more days at Hogwarts, and then some days with the pack, had gone out with the first owl. Then had gone invitations to several of his allies who might not have presumed to contact him at this time of year. He would like to have Ignifer, Honoria, Hawthorn, Adalrico's family, and Thomas with him for Christmas, if they would come. Snape, Narcissa, Peter, Connor, and Draco would already be there, of course.

He paused when he saw Draco sitting at the Slytherin table. Then he shook his head and started forward. Draco always sits at the Slytherin table, he told himself. In fact, he usually sits exactly there and looks exactly like that. What made you stop?

"Going to enjoy yourself tonight?" he murmured as he took the chair beside Draco. The owl from Hogsmeade bearing his own breakfast, shrunken packages of cornflakes and milk, arrived then. Harry brought them back up to normal size and Levitated the cornflakes in the air as he poured the milk over them.

"Yes. And so are you."

Harry stopped for a long moment. The smirk in Draco's tone didn't deserve a startled jerk and a craning of his neck, even if it was what Harry felt like giving him. He turned his head slowly instead, fully expecting Draco's expression to have changed by the time he saw him.

But Draco was still smirking. Harry shook his head slightly. "I read the description of the ritual you chose," he murmured. "It didn't say anything about my joining in, though of course I'll be there to watch you. And isn't Declaring about confronting the wild Dark on your own? Or the wild Light, for that matter?"

“Ah.” Draco popped a sausage into his mouth and eyed Harry’s breakfast with mild disdain. “I didn’t choose that ritual. I chose a different one.”

“Which one, then?” Harry demanded, trying to remember the books he’d helped Draco sort through in the library. There had been too many of them, though, and Harry had done nothing more than scan most of their pages. He had his own tasks, and Draco had wanted to prepare alone.

“You should find out soon.” Draco glanced around the Great Hall. Harry tracked his gaze. It was Midwinter morning, and most of the other students had gone home already, unless they were staying at Hogwarts for the holidays. Only Michael and Luna sat at the Ravenclaw table, and the Hufflepuffs had a very small gathering that happened to include Zacharias Smith. Hermione had gone, but Ron and Ginny both remained with Connor. Harry meant to invite them to Silver-Mirror, too, if their parents would concede to them celebrating Christmas with a bunch of Dark wizards. Most of the teachers were at the head table, but both Professor Sprout and Professor Sinistra had left to spend the holidays with family. Draco sniffed. “A small audience, but I suppose it will do. You’ll all find out at the same time.”

“And so this ritual does require my help?” Harry took a bite of his cornflakes, frowning. “I’ll mess something up if you don’t tell me what to do, Draco, and I know that you don’t want your Declaration anything but perfect.”

“You did well on the last ritual where you had nothing but a few instructions, Harry,” Draco said, and his voice grew low, teasing, intimate.

Harry swallowed, and felt his face go warm. “That was different,” he said. “That was a ritual focused on the both of us. Isn’t this a ritual focused just on you?”

“I suppose I can tell you a bit about it, since you won’t be able to guess which ritual I’m using just from this small piece of information,” Draco said airily. “This Declaration helps me with what I want and need, Harry. And one of the things I want and need is you.”

Harry was still trying to apply that vague statement to any reasonable course of action when all the lights in the Great Hall went out.

There were startled shrieks from several of the students, and even from the head table, though later Harry thought the professors would deny making that sound. He remained still in the blackness, trusting to his ears and his magic to guide him. He'd tried, automatically, to conjure a Lumos around his hand, but it had failed.

He could feel the Dark in the room with them.

It rubbed against his hand, a sensation of prickly fur that might hurt if it was rubbed the wrong way; Harry had heard about sharkskin being like that, sharp enough to cut a swimmer who touched it. It laughed in his head, a curl of a chuckle that boomed into raging waves like the sea, and clenched at his spine with fingers that seemed to pierce straight through his skin and bones. Harry felt the weight above him, the choking heaviness of a cave pressing down. His shoulders sagged under stones, and his heart struggled to beat.

But the power still left him free to turn his head and check on Draco. And what he saw there stilled his breath.

A pulse of light was around Draco—either that, or a pulse of darkness so much darker than the rest that the rest became as light. Draco had his eyes closed, his neck tilted back, and a faint smile on his lips. Jaws outlined his head, cupping and cradling his skull, flowing into the ill-defined form of a beast that crouched on his back. Harry knew those jaws could close in a moment and turn Draco's entire face to little more than scattered pulp.

The tableau lasted for long moments, pierced only by occasional startled cries from the other students. Harry felt his own breath quickening the longer he waited. He had dreaded this day, because he knew it would remind him of Fawkes, and he had thought the wild Dark would want to inflict some punishment on him for fighting it last year.

But he should have remembered that the wild Dark was never consistent from one day to another, much less from one Midwinter to another. What he felt was the proud greeting of a very proud power. It suppressed thoughts of Fawkes and phoenix song, and drew his own darkness to the surface. Harry felt as if his vision swam with tar, and his muscles twitched with the need to run, as he had on Walpurgis after the white stag.

But no white stag would come to them today, he thought, no such creature of light. Tonight was the Dark's time.

And Draco's.

The night vanished the moment he thought that, and Draco leaned back in his seat as the jaws around his head went with it. Harry could see others crying softly in confusion, or staring around as they tried to locate the source of the darkness. Harry knew they wouldn't find it. The wild Dark had taken all the light out of the Great Hall because it wanted to, and then it had left again as suddenly. It had no source, and needed none, because tonight the darkness was everywhere.

Draco opened his eyes and turned his head away, not even looking at Harry before he did so. He knows I'm watching, Harry thought, and something in his mind—a remnant of the wild Dark, or the awareness that he'd built up around Draco since the Halloween ritual, or the cruelty that he looked at, sometimes, and then buried under the bed again—purred with satisfaction at the thought.

Blood ran from two precisely précised holes high up on Draco's skull, staining the blond hair. Harry didn't have to ask to know they came from the jaws' prominent fangs. Solemnly, he stretched out his hand and caressed the hole on the left, without asking if Draco wanted the wound healed. The wound couldn't be healed and still signify Draco's willingness as it was supposed to.

"Does it hurt?" He was surprised to hear his own voice sound so breathy, as if he were still watching the beast hold Draco.

Draco turned around and shook his head. "No. It doesn't." He caught Harry's hand and bent low. Harry felt the impact of teeth on his palm,

hard enough to break the skin, if not to make him bleed. “Not against the thought of what’s going to happen tonight.”

Harry watched him with half-lidded eyes, feeling the darkness dance up and down in him. He was not Declared. He never would be. He had the phoenix song and the preference for Light ethics to ground him if he ever thought that might be happening.

But he had a closeness to Darkness, too. And it had been months since he had truly indulged that—arguably, not since Walpurgis. Most of the magic he had been working since he came back from the Sanctuary was Light. The joining rituals he’d shared with Draco on Halloween and his birthday acknowledged the presence of the Dark, but did not confront it.

It could do no harm to indulge the wildness struggling to escape within him, as long as that was what the ritual allowed.

Draco looked up and caught his eye. At once he grinned, a feral expression that Harry was sure he’d seen before, though he couldn’t remember if it was on Draco’s face or someone else’s. “You don’t need to think about this, Harry, or worry about the rules,” he whispered. “I called to the wild Dark last night. Its appearing this way is a sign that the call was accepted. From now on, the ritual will handle things.” He reached up with his free hand and tugged at Harry’s hair, hard enough to hurt, the way he liked to do. “Let go.”

Harry held back one more moment. “You’re sure the ritual won’t hurt anyone else?”

“Sure.” Draco’s voice was breathy, too, come to that. “It doesn’t want to. The wild Dark isn’t interested in easy victims, not this year. I’ve given myself up to it, and it wants to play.”

Harry nodded, and heard triumphant laughter well in his head, followed by sweetness, followed by the knowledge that he could float off the floor and out the windows of the Great Hall if he wanted to.

He could always have done that, at any time of the year. But this knowledge swarmed back and struck him across the face like a blow

from the bird's lizard tail, and he took a deep breath that seemed full of the complementary knowledge: that he might want to do it, too.

SS

Snape knew which ritual Draco had chosen to use, though he'd never seen it act.

He spent the day observing the boys in silence. They helped him brew a stock of potions that Madam Pomfrey would almost certainly need when the students returned from holiday, as they played with magical toys and took falls from brooms and stayed outside long enough to let the cold air soak into their lungs. Harry brewed with his attention half on the process and half on Draco. He made no mistakes doing it, so Snape held his tongue. That was the only reason.

Draco brewed like a dragon would fly, with intent, leaning forward into the hunt, given so completely to it, heart and soul, that it was impossible to imagine him doing anything else. Snape knew the ritual did not give that perfection, only enhanced it. Usually, something else distracted Draco too thoroughly to allow him that focus on potions. Now, he stirred and cut and pounded and cast stabilizing spells as though that were all that mattered in the world. Not like a madman, nor yet a machine, but like a dancer in the middle of his music, each motion a complete and transient work of art.

Snape shook his head and told himself to stop with such poetic comparisons.

He had given Draco Medicamenta Meatus Verus, two years ago, because he had envisioned the boy taking a path that would carry him out of Harry's shadow, and give him his own interests. Yes, Draco might have found the path on his own sooner or later, but his obsession with Harry had concerned Snape. If he could spend even a few hours a day concentrating on what he loved, then it would be good for the both of them.

That had been a spectacular, resounding mistake. Snape could admit it now.

But only slowly was he learning why it had been a mistake, other than the consequences of the book's compulsion for Draco and its losing him Harry's trust. It had been a mistake because Draco was finding his independence on his own. And really, Snape supposed, that was the only way it would ever matter to him, if he unbound himself. A mentor could encourage, as Snape had seen Joseph doing with Harry, but ultimately the decision came down to the student.

And here it was, the culmination of Snape knew not what silent decisions and discussions and debates and false turns. Draco had chosen a ritual that was going to set him on a path that did not turn backwards. The Justification, the formal name for the ritual, brought him face to face with himself. And Draco, by calling to the wild Dark, by invoking this ritual at Midwinter, had chosen to embrace the darker and Darker parts of himself.

It was not necessarily the future Snape would have chosen for him, especially as Harry's partner. It was not the future, he felt certain, Lucius Malfoy would have wanted.

But it was the future Draco wanted, and it was the one he was going to get. Snape could see the delicate tracery of black fire around him—that might even be what continued to draw Harry's gaze, though he didn't know if Harry was aware of it—and knew it would keep steering him along this path. There was no stopping the Justification, once the call had been given and answered.

There was only moving through it, and surviving it.

For both of them, Snape thought, but he knew this was another situation, like the monitoring board, when he had to step back and let them go. Harry would survive it, both the ritual and having a partner like the one Draco was transforming himself into. He wanted Draco to have his own will? This was the consequence.

And, disturbing as it was to see physical desire in his son's eyes, Snape had to admit that Harry didn't look at all like he minded.

SS

“Greetings, Mother.”

Narcissa narrowed her eyes as Draco came into Silver-Mirror, forcing herself to see not an intangible, indefinable attraction about him, but the actual, present mantle of black fire. When she finished seeing it, she stood with a small smile and bowed to him, not extending a hand. Draco would touch only whom he chose to this day, and while Narcissa was certain he had touched Harry, she would be extremely surprised if it were anyone else.

Sure enough, Draco simply nodded back and sat in a chair across from her, crossing his legs. His gaze was keener than Narcissa could remember it being. Of course, when she squinted, she could see a revolving dot of black in the center of each pupil. Well, black or dark green. At this point in the day, there was no difference between them.

“Is Father coming to my Declaration?” Draco asked.

Narcissa nodded. “You know that he may choose to try and bind the ritual in some way,” she warned Draco. It was not unknown. Many Declaration rituals were delicate things, and the individuals in the center of them needed to give all their attention to the Dark or Light waiting for them, not to what the spectators were doing. Parents had bound injunctions to obedience into the patterns of the ritual before, and their children had never noticed. Enemies sometimes introduced a weakness in the form of a disease which slowly but surely weakened the victim’s heart. Narcissa would watch for such interference by Lucius. She could not guarantee that she would catch it.

Draco laughed softly. “He will, I’m certain,” he said. “But you can’t bind the Justification, Mother, unless you begin before the wild Dark answers the call.”

Narcissa raised her eyebrows. “And what makes you so certain that he did not?”

Draco leaned forward. “Because Father underestimates me,” he said. “He has continually underestimated me. He didn’t bother extracting a

promise out of me not to go to Harry during the rebellion, for example. He merely assumed that I would obey him, because I'm his son, and weaker than he is. And I don't think he's changed his mind. He'll come prepared to counter any number of the weaker rituals, but not this one. It's not one that he thinks I'll choose." Draco's smile flashed for a moment, reminding Narcissa of something that lay in the swamp and showed too many teeth. "Too bloody for me, he'll assume. Too violent." He cocked his head. "Too dominant."

Narcissa might have protested that, but she remembered too many of the words Lucius had murmured to her, when he still assumed they shared one heart and one soul about Draco. He did worry about Draco's seeming submissiveness to Harry, and underestimate his will. He forgot the times Draco had chosen to exert his will—in second year when he found out that his father had given Harry Tom Riddle's diary, when he reached for confirmation as magical heir, when he refused, in dozens of small and subtle ways, to do what his father asked of him. Draco might not ordinarily exert his will, because he had to want something greatly before he would think the effort worth making.

But when he did, Narcissa did not think anything could stop him.

She met her son's eyes, and inclined her head. "I think you are right, Draco," she said. "And Harry?" She did not have to elaborate the question.

"Is going to enjoy himself," said Draco blandly, and that ended that.

SS

Harry shivered as they made their way out onto the Hogwarts grounds. The sun was setting, and that meant the time had almost come for Draco to finish his ritual and call the wild Dark's direct attention. Harry, Snape, and Henrietta, as a neutral Dark witness, would watch, along with Draco's parents, but no one else was welcome.

Harry had to admit he was almost sorry to see the ritual end. The day had been fascinating, as the magic pointed out to him all sorts of

small things he hadn't noticed about Draco before. The color of his eyes, the way he bit his lip not only when he was worried or thinking but when he was concentrating deeply on a potion, the way his expression could light with laughter even when he didn't make a sound out loud. At one point Draco had stood in the pale winter sunlight falling through a window and smiled, as if defying the Light to find any good in him or take him back. The sunshine had turned the edges of his face to blankness, his hair to a hard pure luster as cold as adamant.

And Harry had known, for just a moment, what it might mean to find someone else physically beautiful.

They walked through snow now, and biting air that finally made Harry give in and cast a warming charm, conceding that his training couldn't protect him all the time. Snape was beside Harry, and Henrietta on the other side, wand out as she checked for threats. Draco walked slightly in front of them.

Then he turned around.

Harry met his eyes.

He caught his breath. Draco's face looked—uplifted, transfigured, filled with a burning, brewing flame that Harry had seen only in a Light context before, when he freed the unicorns and they cast their glory on the bracken, the trees, and the rest of the forest. Come to think of it, that had been in winter, too, almost two years ago now.

This did not shed glory on anything. It shouted impatiently for its own glory to be noticed. Draco looked up at the first approaching stars, and Harry saw a faint red stripe of light stroke his face as the sun appeared from behind racing clouds.

He doesn't need to shout to get my attention, Harry thought. He has it.

He felt anxieties worrying and pressing at him, trying to remind him of all the times he had wounded or ignored Draco, or the recent fact that Draco had hurt Michael out of pique at not getting attention, or getting the wrong kind from the wrong person. But Harry shrugged and let

them slide off, and not even into an Occlumency pool. Draco had asked him to relax and let go today.

He could. The worries occupied him almost every other day, outside the bounds of the ritual. This was for today. The worries would wait for tomorrow.

They reached the place Draco had chosen, and marked out that morning, though Harry had not known with what. He saw, now. A circle lay in the grass, framed by steep banks of snow. Draco had used a spell—or perhaps the wild Dark had used one—that burned the ground. Whenever a dollop of slush slid into it, that dollop flashed and hissed into steam before it could touch the circle itself.

Lucius and Narcissa were waiting for them on the other side of the ring. Harry eyed them for a moment. Narcissa wore deep blue robes, the color of sapphires, the very oldest color of winter. She supported Draco, and indicated that support by showing her approval of the time of year when he had chosen to hold his Declaration.

Lucius wore white.

Harry felt his lip twitch in exasperation. Lucius could not give up, could he? The white proclaimed Lucius an outsider, dressed like a Light wizard for all that he was Dark. He showed support, but only qualified support. Draco had done something that disappointed him.

I hope it's the choice of ritual, Harry thought spitefully. He had restrained his questions about what, exactly, would happen at Draco's insistence. He didn't think Lucius had, but that he could not be satisfied even now—

Harry cut himself off with a shake of his head, and faced the burned circle as Draco stepped within it. He walked with his head up, proud, self-assured. He didn't look at any of them, though his sight line went past Lucius and Narcissa as he faced the setting sun.

"I called to you," Draco said, his voice so low and warm and intimate that Harry's body tingled with awareness, "before the dawn this morning, at a moment of deepest dark when clouds were in the sky

and snow was on the ground. You answered me. Will you answer me now, and let me justify myself to you?"

Harry caught sight of Lucius's frown, which quickly turned into wide eyes. He mouthed the words that Draco had just spoken, and took a step forward, as if he actually intended to cross the burned line and take Draco away from what he was doing.

Then blindness struck them all.

Harry saw it as a black hand that passed across his vision and stole away his sight. He stood still, his shoulders hunched, his heartbeat suddenly the all-consuming sense impulse for him as his panic built. But he knew he had to remain quiet, and trust Draco. No one was allowed to interfere. It seemed that no one else was allowed to see what happened, either, except for Draco.

Harry heard a soft crunching noise, like snow impacted by the push of dense paws. Snape's hand rested on his shoulder. Harry leaned his cheek on it, as he listened to the great beast walk towards his lover. Stride, stride, stride, stride, and thump. Four feet, Harry thought, and a long tail.

He could feel the moment the beast halted on the edge of the burned ring. Silence built around them, pregnant as the hour before a storm burst.

The voice, when it spoke, made Harry nearly convulse in joy.

So. Show me that you are worthy to live.

SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS

Let me justify myself to you.

It was not until he heard those words that Lucius understood how wrong he had been. The burned circle and the sunset timing were common features of many Declaration rituals. He had waited for Draco to humble himself, abase himself, fall to his knees before the

Dark in the particular version of the Minor Music Ritual Lucius was sure he'd chosen.

He had never expected his son to choose the Justification.

He cannot. He will be killed.

Lucius had lunged at the circle fully intending to put a stop to this madness. The Dark had not yet accepted Draco's invitation, not yet arrived. Until it did, there was a small chance that he could break the Declaration by dragging Draco out of the circle.

He was exasperated with Draco, irritated at his recent behavior, and determined to control him, but he did not want to lose his son. And that was what he would do if he let Draco do this.

Then he went blind, and had to halt. He would survive if he stepped over the line of burned grass, but not if he stepped upon it.

In the hammering silence of that moment after blinding, doubt crept into his mind. Draco was not foolish enough to do something like this when he was sure he wouldn't survive it, no matter how desperate he might be to prove his worth to Harry or his parents. He was Slytherin, a survivor. He would not throw away his life.

So he must be confident he could handle the Justification.

The doubt spread through Lucius like a pattern of cracks through ice. And then the Dark arrived, and he had to listen instead, but the doubt grew further and further, worming fine lines into some of his most cherished convictions.

SS

So. Show me that you are worthy to live.

Draco had been waiting for this moment.

The Dark had come to him in the form of a chimera. The head facing him was a lion's, but the body a black goat's, and the tail that ran

behind it was that of a dragon. Sharp, ice-edged wings trailed from its shoulders, a fan-shape like the ridge on some lizards' backs. Draco knew the teeth could rend him apart, that the tail could cave his ribs in, and that the hooves were sharp enough to scalp him. And it would all be done with astonishing quickness, too. Chimeras were the swiftest beasts that lived.

He had not been able to predict the form. Of course he hadn't. The wild Dark did not manifest consistency.

The lion's eyes were a deep and sickly black, like the spots that Draco knew had swum in his own eyes all day. Not looking away from them, he put out a hand.

There was no motion, but the chimera's teeth were clamped around his fingers. Draco imagined the scarred stump on the end of Harry's wrist. It could sever his hand, he knew. It could crush his fingers to less than the solidity of butter. Bone would tumble about him in small and glistening shards.

He breathed evenly.

The chimera laughed at him. He had passed the first test of the Justification, the temptation to run away or cower, but there was always later. And he had not managed to impress it. Nothing impressed the wild Dark, Draco knew. One fought it, and then it circled away and became whole again, forgetting the defeat.

Rather like my father.

Rather like, the voice agreed, the pulse-pounding joy of a storm in flight, and the wild Dark was in his head with him. Draco had invited it in.

It ravaged his mind.

It dived deep, and all his memories were prey for and play for it. It dragged up the small and selfish cruelties he had done as a child, and laughed at them. It snickered at the memory of his proud and horrible father standing helpless in front of the mess Draco had made

of his room, with a burst of accidental magic that insured no house elves could touch any of the items. It grabbed his head and pushed it into his own embarrassment over his first sexual desires, as a Kneazle's owner might rub its nose over the feces it had left on the carpet.

Draco withstood it all. He knew those things existed, and now that he had called the Dark, he had no choice but to let the ritual continue. What the Dark saw in him, what it told to him, what it did to him, was its own choice.

Why did you call me? The voice made Draco shiver, but not with cold and not with fear. It was the same arousal he'd sometimes felt over Harry's magic in fourth year, when Harry grew angry enough to let it matter. You have nothing to offer me. What are you but a spoiled and selfish brat?

A spoiled and selfish brat who has done these things, Draco answered, and he brought up the memories of his wrongdoings.

He had known, even as he flirted with Michael, that this might turn around and bite him at some point. But he had been unable to stop. Why should he? It got him what he wanted, admiration for his physical looks, the one kind he lacked, and he was confident that he could survive what came after this. He had resented Harry's punishment; it had made him reconsider his actions, but only in the sense that he had been stupid and would not do anything like it again because of the stupidity. He had not agreed that Harry had any right to punish him. Nor had he thought that his original impulses, the desire to flirt and be noticed, were wrong. He should have chosen his target better, and managed his emotions better, so that the admiration would not turn into obsessive love.

There had been other times like that, too. Draco had meant what he told Michael about his possession. It had been strange to leap in and out of Death Eaters' heads on the Midsummer battlefield, and know they were dying when he left them, and that he was guiding them to their deaths in cold blood. But he had not thought of them past the moment. He couldn't remember their names now, couldn't remember the feel of their minds. The pain of those actually important to him,

himself and Harry, had occupied him in the days after the battle, once he was assured that his parents and Professor Snape had taken no serious injuries.

That is the greatest difference, then. The wild Dark's voice was eager. I know the one who calls himself vates, and I know you. He has many whose pain is important to him. You have few whom you truly love.

That was true, Draco acknowledged. He knew that Lucius loved only him and Narcissa. He was fairly sure that his mother loved only his father, him, and Harry. He came of a proud family tradition in loving fiercely, protectively, possessively—and only those people he absolutely had to.

The wide circles were for Harry. The compassion for every small and hurt living thing was for Harry. The love for the wizarding world that the prophecy proclaimed the one to defeat the Dark Lord had to have was for Harry. He was welcome to them.

That did not mean Draco hated the whole rest of the world. Of course not. He might try to get along with them if it seemed beneficial, as it was more and more coming to seem with Harry's brother, or he might do something for them if it did not hurt him, or was amusing, or helped him in his own plans, or pleased Harry.

But his compassion, his love, were reserved for a few people alone. He did not see why they should extend to more.

He supposed he had tried loving more people in the past. There had been a time when he loved Pansy as a friend, for example, or thought he did. Losing her had hurt. But he had recovered from his grief and gone on. He had seen what grief did to Harry when it was deep enough, casting him down, disordering his mind. He had grieved like that over the loss of his phoenix.

Draco did not. He never would. The people who were important to him could destroy him if they died, but that was just another reason to keep them safe as strongly as he could. Draw the circle and defend—or, better yet, reach outside the circle and manipulate so that fewer

enemies would ever look their way. The protection of those he loved was in the end a protection of himself.

There were some who called Slytherin irredeemably evil, the wild Dark said in his head, winding Draco around itself like thread on a spool. You know that is not true, do you not?

Yes, Draco knew. Slytherin did not mean irredeemably evil. Light Lords had come out of his House.

What Slytherin tended to mean was selfish, to a greater or lesser degree. Selfish of ambition, selfish of place and precedence, devoted to gaining one's own goals and then hanging on to them. A Slytherin did not give coins and compassion away to every stranger who passed unless doing so would safeguard something more important, like happiness or a sense of self-worth. And Slytherins loved best, were happiest, when they could take those they loved away from the rest of the world and lock them up like the treasures they were.

Draco could not do that with Harry. But then, he'd always known he would have to share Harry with most of the world. What he could do was evaluate his own happiness, know what things he absolutely had to have for himself in his relationship with Harry—just as he knew the people he absolutely had to love—and ignore the things that didn't matter. When someone did intrude on his territory, then it was the time to fight back like an enraged dragon.

And Harry was not someone who only had to be protected. He was a partner who could protect, too, who could hold his own in a fight. Since Draco also enjoyed being sheltered and petted and spoiled, this made him smugly pleased. Harry's magic aroused him. His beauty made Draco want him. His past inspired those rare bursts of sympathy Draco was capable of. And he was honest enough to say, most of the time, exactly where they stood.

The one thing Draco could wish for with Harry was a little more lowering of the barriers—more frequent sex, more attention paid to him physically, more times when Harry would say what first came into his head instead of holding back and phrasing it diplomatically. The Breaking of the Boundaries had started them down this path. Joseph

had encouraged Harry to go further. Draco intended the Justification to show Harry something so wonderful that he would never want to go back to the cramped and sterilized little existence he'd led.

The wild Dark laughed in his mind. Draco started. He'd almost forgotten its presence, much more interested in exploring himself.

You are a selfish and spoiled brat. The wild Dark sounded highly amused. You entertain me, Draco Malfoy. You have what you have sought, my recognition and your Declaration. You are a Dark wizard.

Searing pain radiated from Draco's hand. Opening his eyes, which he had closed sometime during the Justification, he saw the chimera removing its jaws. The waves of cold and pressure turned to waves of ecstasy a moment later, as the tooth-marks from that morning had. Draco closed his eyes again and moaned.

Take your lover somewhere else, said the wild Dark. No, not somewhere else. I have changed my mind.

Draco opened his hazy eyes in time to see the chimera facing the stars, tilting back its head, and roaring. A spiral of snow came shooting down from the sky immediately, shining so brightly that Draco was sure the stars themselves were falling for a moment. Wind buffeted him, tore his feet from under him, and carried him into the air.

He blew through blackness, weightless and boneless, until he hit a cloth-covered surface. Breathless, he bounced and tried to get up, but a heavier weight pressed him down a moment later. Draco blinked, and pushed through wild black hair, and saw Harry's startled face, green eyes obviously free of the blinding spell the wild Dark had put on them.

Enjoy, said the voice, and the chimera was gone.

Draco knew this was a room with a bed in it, and it could have been their own bedroom or a place the wild Dark had conjured for them. He didn't know. He didn't care.

He kissed Harry violently, and so began the attack.

SS

This is new.

He licked his lips, or tried to—hard as they were kissing, his tongue simply ran right out of his mouth and into Draco’s—and considered what he wanted to do. He didn’t have to go along with this. He could insist that things slow down, and they could make love more gently. Or he could walk away altogether, perhaps. Harry doubted this lovemaking was part of the Declaration. It was more something Draco wanted to do.

He could walk away.

He closed his eyes and did.

be shrieking in approval. But Harry didn't think he could hear it, because Draco's hand had found that place on the side of his neck that Harry normally hated and pinched it, hard.

Harry's body jerked like a marionette, and he choked into Draco's mouth. Draco sat back for a moment, looking pleased with himself.

Harry took the opportunity to Vanish all their clothes. Draco's pupils dilated noticeably when he found himself abruptly naked and sitting astride an equally naked boyfriend. For a moment, the haze in his eyes vanished all the same, and he gave Harry a quizzical glance.

"Yeah." Harry could see his magic, beyond Draco's head, drawing what looked like a series of intense and intricate pictures across the walls, but he was more interested in the way Draco's eyes got even darker. "I want it, too."

He waited for one more staring, tension-laden moment, then reached up and cupped Draco's head, drawing him down hard enough for his teeth to cut into Draco's lip. Harry rolled them over, trying to get on top again. Draco braced a leg on the bed and pushed off with his knee halfway through the roll. Harry grunted as he landed firmly on his back once more, one of the springs in the mattress stinging his shoulders.

"I want to do what you've done to me twice now," Draco said, hovering over him. "Twice you've touched me, and not allowed me to touch you. This time, you're going to share yourself with me, Harry, and you're not allowed to move. Or to give me anything in return." His eyes cut as he leaned over and stared into Harry's face. "Or are you too unselfish to do that?"

Harry gritted his teeth. He wanted this, and not only because it would please Draco. He could say that at least. The thought of lying still before Draco and letting him touch him like that made a warm frisson run through him that rivaled the cold ones the wild Dark had introduced.

"I want you to touch me," he said.

Draco's smile was pure triumph, and undoubtedly the most beautiful thing Harry had ever seen on his face. He lowered his head and fastened his teeth on that hateful point on Harry's neck. Harry swore as he bit it. The tremors that set up seemed to make more muscles in his groin clench than he'd known existed. He tossed his head back urgently, laying himself bare for Draco, the voices that said he couldn't so muted that they might as well not have spoken.

"Fuck, Draco."

"What do you think I'm doing?" Draco muttered, and sucked on the bite mark, making Harry half-shout. His body was slick with sweat already, and he'd forgotten what cold felt like. He writhed on the bed, but kept his hand from rising to touch Draco, just as Draco had requested.

Draco moved down the bed, surprising Harry, who'd thought he would go slowly. But then his hand engulfed Harry, and Harry let his head fall back with a groan, deciding that quick was perfectly all right with him.

Pleasure made his body shiver and convulse. Harry had lost control of his mouth, and had no desire to have it back, even if what he was uttering was a string of nonsense. He couldn't remember sex feeling like this before, like stabs of spears up and down his body, and the urge to push and thrust and scrape reduced to elemental necessity, rather than a step in a dance or ritual.

That's because you've never let yourself go before, he realized. This is what it could feel like, if you'd trusted yourself enough. This—

And then he screamed aloud, because that was a new sensation, yes it was. Not mouth, and not hand. Well, all right, yes it was a hand, but in the wrong place, or at least a place he hadn't expected it, stroking gently around the curve of his arse and then parting his cheeks.

"Draco." Harry was sure he said that. He might have wailed it, though.

"Lie still. You promised me," Draco said, or Harry thought he said, somewhere in the drifting haze that was currently his mind and his

magic. “And I think we’re past the point of elaborating each step of a sex act before we do it. If it hurts, tell me.” He had something slick and sweaty on his fingers. Harry saw one glimpse of his intent expression before he threw his head back. His whole body felt tight, and it did hurt, but then stabbing pleasure invaded again, because it seemed Draco hadn’t forgotten about his erection. He whimpered.

The finger stopped moving, but then pushed forward again a moment later. Harry thought he was bracing himself on his heels, his legs arching, his spine curving. He didn’t know for certain. Every sensation that struck him lasted only a moment before another overcame it, so that he was buried in a succession of emotions and pressures and pullings, steady as waves.

He babbled something about “clean,” he did remember that, and Draco said, “That’s why I brought my wand.” Or something. Harry was currently trying to breathe and remember that he had to do that and feel good at the same time. It seemed impossible.

He could relax, though, couldn’t he? Go limp? Then it probably wouldn’t hurt so much. And he was already breaking boundaries anyway. He was here of his own free will. Joseph would be so proud, Harry thought, and tried to picture his muscles as limp puddles of flesh.

It worked. Suddenly Draco’s finger—fingers, probably—slid a little further. It led to images of snakes, which was disturbing. Harry gave a drunken little giggle, and saw his magic mess up the mural that it was making on the ceiling above them.

“Hush,” Draco whispered, and kissed the side of his chest, which Harry thought was an odd place for a kiss, and then pressed deeper. He had the oddest expression on his face, Harry thought, as if he were groping for a misplaced textbook at the bottom of his trunk.

Well, groping is certainly the word for it—

He screamed then, and didn’t care if anyone heard him. He really didn’t. Pleasure was hitting him like boiling lead, and the hot wires strung through his nerves had all come to life at once. Harry was

certain he was making all sorts of undignified motions with his hips, and babbling nonsense.

“That’s called your prostate, Harry.” Draco sounded unfairly cool and collected. “I take it you like this?”

“Yes,” Harry said, which was also unfair, because he would have liked to add something along the lines of, “What does it look like?” But the pleasure had other ideas, and so did Draco’s fingers. Harry supposed his hips did, too, if the way he was moving backward was any indication.

He felt the skin on his groin tingling and tightening, and he concentrated very hard on that to the exclusion of all else, and so managed, with only a few interruptions for panting, “Keep that up and—I’m going to come—before you—get in—here, Draco.” Yes, it was strained, and trailed off to a moan at the end, but it was a complete sentence. Harry felt prouder than he thought he had a right to be, most days. Then he decided, Screw it. I have a right to be as proud as I like.

“Well,” said Draco, and at last a tremble of strain made itself known in his voice, to Harry’s eternal gratification. “Can’t have that.” He eased backward, which eased the pleasure a bit, and Harry eased his head around and watched Draco.

The darkness that had transfigured his face earlier that day had come back. Harry didn’t think he’d ever noticed all those shadows or angles before, and he’d never seen Draco look at him the way he was doing now. Even the man-before-parched-water look during the Breaking of Boundaries didn’t compare. This was a look that said Draco wanted to fuck him, would tear his own skin off in a moment if he didn’t fuck him.

“You’re beautiful,” Harry told him, really seeing it.

Draco shuffled carefully up the bed so that he could kiss him, biting Harry’s lower lip on the way, in return for the lower-lip cut that Harry had given him, he supposed. “Never thought you’d say that so passionately.”

And then he was back into position, and lifting Harry's legs carefully over his shoulders, and Harry had the feeling he would be horribly uncomfortable in a moment, but that didn't matter; it wasn't as if either of them would be lasting very long.

"I should make some long speech about your beauty, too," Draco said.

Harry wondered if he noticed the magic that briefly stopped drawing pictures and came up to hover behind him with steel claws extended.

And then he didn't care, because Draco was pushing carefully forward.

It hurt. But Harry had borne far worse pain, and never as much pleasure. When the pain ate at him, he twisted away from it and rode under it. He would not risk putting it in an Occlumency pool. The point at which he'd finally broken free was no time to go back to his prison.

Draco pushed, and pushed, and pushed again until Harry thought his legs were going to tear off at the hips and his prostate had bugged off. Then he halted where he was and tilted his head back. Harry watched the darkness collect and swirl on his face, haunting every drop of sweat that fell, every crease that seamed his forehead, every straining line of his throat.

Then Draco pulled slightly back and threw himself forward.

And it turned out that Harry's prostate hadn't bugged off after all, just gone into hiding for a little while. Harry forced himself back at least as hard as Draco was thrusting forward, and laughed, because, damn, thinking of the word bugged while it was happening to him was funny.

Draco gasped and tried to say something, probably to ask why he was laughing. Harry didn't give him the chance to. He called his magic, and it floated his upper body from the bed, giving him leverage that Harry couldn't have had with one hand missing. Draco moaned at the change in angle, and then it was his turn to scream. That

satisfied Harry, something wild and selfish in him that he didn't want to admit hid at the bottom of his mind and looked out through his eyes.

But this time he could admit it, since he was admitting everything. He wasn't vates or savior at the moment. He was just Harry. It felt wonderful.

And he didn't think he could ever thank Draco enough for making him that way.

It really didn't take long. Harry met Draco thrust for thrust, relentless in competition, excitement speeding through him as it did when he flew on his Firebolt. But this felt far fucking better than the Firebolt ever had, and Harry found himself laughing again when he could find the breath to do so, laughing for the pure joy and fun of it.

Draco caught his gaze, and Harry saw him open his mouth again, then close it, seeming to understand the laughter wasn't for his performance. He shut his eyes instead and sped up.

Harry felt rapture and joy and love and Draco pulling at him, trying to throw him off the edge.

For the first time ever, he really let himself go with them.

He shook as he soaked his belly and his groin, his body responding in a way that only catching the Snitch or thrumming with magic had ever made him do. The thought wandered through his haze: So this is why people like having orgasms so much. They do feel good, don't they?

Draco was still pushing inside him when Harry had done, and Harry didn't intend to relax just yet. Draco had told him to lie still and accept without giving, but Harry figured he'd already broken that rule when he sat up. He reached out, gripped Draco's shoulder with his hand, and pushed forward with all his might.

Draco's shoulders twisted and rolled like someone doing a Wronski Feint, and then he came, too, his head rolling back against Harry's wrist and his mouth open. And still beautiful, Harry thought, even as

even though he had quite a few aches himself. He had done that to Harry. He had made him let go—

No, that wasn't quite true. He had made Harry come, yes. But Harry had done the same thing to him. What made this truly special was that Harry had broken his barriers and done as Draco asked because he wanted to, reveled in his own selfish pleasure, and refused to care what anyone else would think.

Draco no more expected every day to be like that than he expected every day to be Midwinter. But they had changed again, and if they turned backwards on the spiral, they would also return to this point.

He had never felt so self-confident, so self-satisfied, so violently sure in his life.

“Draco?”

He cocked his head at Harry.

Harry had braced himself on one elbow, his torso and head raised, though his lower body was still comfortably twined with Draco's. He had a smile on his face that Draco had never seen before, and eyes that were full of light.

“I still think you're beautiful,” he murmured.

Chapterlette: A Collection of Glimpses

Lucius sat before his hearth in the study of Malfoy Manor and turned his cup of cold wine this way and that. He could have had the house elves mull it, or Transfigure it so that it retained all the alcohol of wine while having a considerably sweeter taste. But at this moment, he thought what he wanted, or should want, was harsh and unaltered reality.

He had failed.

He drank the wine, a long gulp that did not yield until the liquid threatened to choke him. Then he held the glass out in front of him and watched the fire spark through it, catching delicate, glorious colors in it that he did not deserve.

He had been wrong.

Another swallow of wine, this time nearly enough to finish the cup. Lucius felt his lip twitching, his head spinning with the advent of drunkenness. He would normally never do something like this, but he was within heavily warded walls, and a room where even the house elves knew better than to disturb him. But this was punishment, punishment for failing to recognize when he had made a mistake. He had kept plunging forward, able to justify every error, able to say that, in truth, what he had done was not so very great a problem. It might even weave more opportunities for him. If the scheme with the Unspeakables failed, he would turn to Scrimgeour. If that one failed—but it would not, could not, when Unbreakable Vows bound them both—he would work his way back into Harry's good graces. He would tame his son to hand again. Each failure to do so only meant another chance to move forward. He might have to alter his tactics, but that did not mean he had been wrong.

He saw now that he had.

He had committed the worst possible sin, one for which he had would have despised his own father if Abraxas had been either weak or foolish enough to do it. He had made Draco see him as unnecessary. There might have been moments when his son would be glad to rely

on him, lean on his strength, but Lucius had taught him he couldn't. So Draco had looked within and found his own strength instead.

He was dependent no longer. He was someone who had faced the Justification and survived it.

Lucius did not know what had led his son to make that decision. Oh, he could guess. It might be a matter of proving his worth to his partner, or wanting to demonstrate his courage. Or he could have wanted a Declaration ritual that Lucius absolutely could not tamper with. But there were other Declaration rituals that were beyond parental influence and still less risky. Lucius thought the risk was an inherent reason Draco had chosen the Justification.

But he could not imagine, still, what the compensation of it might have been.

Draco had become a person Lucius did not know, and that was dangerous.

Worse, he had seen Harry's eyes shining as he watched him. At the time, Lucius had simply thought that meant Harry was infatuated with his son, and if he could gain Draco back, then he could win Harry back, too.

Now he recognized it for what it was. Harry admired Draco's strength, and a man who did that would have no need for Lucius's strength.

He was in a trap, a binding he could not get out of. And he had woven that trap of his own making. He would never be safe again. Even if he courted Harry and Draco back, and preserved the secrets the Unspeakables had blackmailed him on, he could not imagine what would happen if Harry and Draco found out that he had been the one to betray Hawthorn Parkinson's condition to the Department of Mysteries.

Lucius drank more wine.

SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS

Narcissa could have been walking about Silver-Mirror, making preparations for their guests. It was not so very many more days before they would all arrive. And she knew her son was safe, so had no reason to worry over him.

She was not. Instead, she sat before the fire of the reading room where she liked to spend the most time and gazed into the flames, and smiled.

She had done it.

It had taken years and years of effort, years of maneuvering and arranging and yielding on less important matters and, rarely, outright confrontation. But she had done it. She had raised Draco as a wizard who could take his place on his own in wizarding society, and who could do it well enough to choose a ritual both his father and his partner would have disapproved of, did they know all the details. Draco was not relying on their approval. He had broken free of the chains that Narcissa had feared might bind him when she first saw how obsessed he was with Harry, the chains of doing nothing that went against Harry's good opinion.

And now he had his father to serve as an example, perhaps even an example of failure, if Lucius pushed hard enough. He did not live to worship him as he had when he was eleven.

Narcissa could count her work done.

Oh, she would love seeing what happened in the future years, how Draco, and Harry too, continued their upward spiral, where it led them and what great things they would achieve. But if someone had cast the Killing Curse at her the moment Draco's successful Justification was finished, she could have died with a smile on her lips.

She found that she did not want to sit still after all. She stood and went to fetch herself wine, glorying in the sound of her own footsteps. Often, in Silver-Mirror, Narcissa found herself listening for ghosts, the ghosts of her sisters and cousins and younger childhood self.

For tonight, there were only her own.

Draco raised an objection against a sacrifice, Snape knew Harry would at least consider it.

Narcissa might approve of that, seeing that Draco's dependence on Harry was at last equally returned.

Snape did not know if he did.

He feared what might happen if Draco died in the war. He would have been concerned even in a time of peace, but this, with the emotional destruction of Harry that would follow in its wake...

Harry could easily forget about everything else in his life if Draco died, including the other people who loved him. He might seek to follow his partner, instead of doing as he had told Snape last year, and trying to detach himself enough from the deaths of those he loved that he could go on, and function, and fight.

That entwining with one another would only grow fiercer from this moment forward. Snape feared it was another mistake that he must allow his son to make.

It was dangerous in another way, too. Snape thought Draco might one day decide to detach himself and find another partner. No, it was not likely, but unlikelier things had happened. And that would destroy Harry as thoroughly as his death.

Love during wartime was never easy. Snape had reason to know. If it turned out that the ending of love during wartime happened—

Snape's gaze strayed across the room and locked on the cauldron full of purple potion he sometimes toyed with, adding more ingredients and seeing how potent he could make it without its boiling over or being utterly ruined.

It was now one of the deadliest poisons he has ever brewed, unlikely to be cured by anything short of a bezoar. Snape had at first imagined it applied to werewolves, but he would and could apply it elsewhere if Draco were ever...unwise.

since the magic called to his own. But this? This scene with Harry acting so much like a new lover, as if he were giddy, as if just—

As if just being around Draco makes him happy.

Draco makes him happy.

Connor stifled an enormous sigh. He had lost the right to play games with Draco, then, and try to antagonize him. He wasn't going to bow to the prat, and if he spouted stupid shit about purity of blood Connor was still going to let him know it was stupid shit. But Draco was a part of Harry's life, and he made him damn happy, and there weren't enough people who did that for Connor to have the right to drive one away.

Besides, he thought, he would get at least one funny moment out of this.

He stood and held out his hand to Draco. "Congratulations," he said solemnly.

Draco's eyes widened most gratifyingly. Connor let only a tiny smile out onto his face. He didn't expect me to be the bigger man. He expected me to throw some fit about this. That means that if he reacts badly to this, he's the one at fault.

Slowly, as if expecting something from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes to be hidden in his palm, Draco clasped his hand. Connor wrung his, never looking away from his eyes, trying to convey that he knew exactly what Draco had done with his brother last night—well, if not exactly, enough not to need any more details—and didn't hate it.

Draco looked extremely put out. Connor smiled at him one more time and sat down. "Congratulations to the both of you," he added to Harry.

Harry beamed at him and dragged Draco away to the Slytherin table. Draco looked over his shoulder a few times, as if he expected Connor to be sticking his tongue out at him.

Connor wasn't going to. He had better things to think about, given the new role Draco Malfoy was going to play in his life and the new role he was going to play in Draco's. There was what would have to happen if Draco ever hurt Harry, for instance. He recalled Hermione saying once that she'd found a spell that would tie someone's bollocks together behind their ears, and that she'd considered using it on Zacharias.

Connor thought he would owl her and ask to know the spell.

Just in case.

Chapter Fifty-Five: A Wind-Drenched Christmas

"She should, if she just understood," said Ginny, her cheeks flushing so much that Harry thought she would fall over. "But she won't let us. She says that Christmas is a time for family, and Bill and Charlie and Percy are all coming home, so we have to be at the Burrow, too." She tossed her hair. "Never mind that we could visit you in the morning and the Burrow later in the day!"

Harry thought Molly Weasley's stubborn refusal to let Ron and Ginny spend Christmas Day with him and Connor stemmed less from love of family and more from worry about what her two youngest children might get up to around Dark wizards, but he didn't want to tell Ginny that and make her more sour. "I'm sorry you can't come," he said instead, and held out the package he'd Levitated behind his back while she complained. "Happy Christmas anyway."

She stared at him for a moment, absolutely astonished, then carefully unwrapped the gift. She was smiling by the time she had it halfway open, and looked up with a grin. "Thank you, Harry." He'd got her Chaser's gloves, made for clinging to the Quaffle better, and even hardening themselves into a stone-like substance if a Bludger tried to hit her hand. Harry felt it was a bit impersonal as a gift, but he still didn't know Ginny all that well.

"Where'd you get those, Ginny?" Ron was coming down the stairs of the Gryffindor common room, his eyes riveted to the gloves, but he relaxed and gave Harry a nod when he saw him. Harry grinned ruefully and held out another package.

"I almost wish you hadn't seen those," he muttered, while Ron speedily unwrapped his package.

Ron gave a grunt of both understanding and happiness when he saw his own gloves, this time made for a Keeper, to cast extra warming charms on his hands; a Keeper frequently did less pure flying during the game than the other players, and their fingers could become paralyzed with the cold during autumn or winter matches. He nodded to Harry. "Thanks, mate." He paused, as if embarrassed, and Harry realized that he probably didn't have a gift for him.

"It's all right, Ron," Harry assured him. "It doesn't matter. I do wish that you could come visit us for Christmas, but what you give Connor during the rest of the year—and what Ginny did for me when she came to Woodhouse—is too great to be repaid." He nodded to the gloves. "This is just a small return, the only kind I can make."

"You're getting better at the noble speeches, Harry," said Ginny, and her eyes shone with laughter. "Three years ago, that would have sounded as if you were oblivious to the implications of what you said. Now you actually look human."

"Well, a large part of that is Draco," said Harry, curious to see how they would react. Ron opened his mouth, then shut it again. Ginny just rolled her eyes.

"He's important to you," she said. "But a prat. He would have more friends if he didn't act like such an idiot sometimes. Tell him that."

"I don't think he cares," said Harry, startled to hear a little defensiveness leak into his voice, and got another roll of the eyes in return.

"I know he doesn't," Ginny pointed out patiently. "But then he can't complain when people don't fall down at his feet worshipping him the way he seems to want."

And with that, Harry had to be content. Connor was down at dinner, and he would see him tomorrow when they went to Silver-Mirror for Christmas, anyway, so Harry was going to wait to give him his gift. He hugged both Ron and Ginny and left Gryffindor Tower, leaning against the stone of the wall for a moment as he closed his eyes.

He did feel different. Granted, it had been only three days since Draco's Justification, so perhaps he couldn't have expected the effects of the ritual to end yet. But this was still so unusual that he had to take notice of it. Contentment thrummed through every vein in his body, and when someone said something bad about Draco Harry found that he wanted to correct them immediately. And he kept noticing—well, beauty. The beauty was only on Draco's face so far,

for the most part, but his eyes tracked beams of sunlight across the floor of the Great Hall now, and just yesterday he'd halted in front of a painting and stared at it, enthralled for the first time with the colors in it.

Harry was a bit frightened to discover what he was like with his barriers down. Did this make him weaker? Surely such a fundamental change could not be all positive. And he should retain the ability to lift the barriers back again in case he was in a situation where he needed them, like a battle.

Perhaps the effect would recede with time, he told himself. He and Draco could spend a larger portion of time both together and in bed right now than usual, given the Christmas holidays. And that had to renewing Harry's near-obsessive interest in him. Yes, it would probably fade as they eased further away from the Justification.

He gave himself a brisk shake, and went to find Luna so he could give her her present.

SS

Luna touched the stone of the wall, and listened gravely as she nodded. Yes, this large block was unhappy here among smaller ones. When the Founders raised Hogwarts, it had tried to tell them so, but none of them had the ability to listen to objects. So it had sat here in the walls ever since, unwanted and lonely. It needed to shrink, or the other blocks needed to grow larger, to accommodate it.

Luna stepped back and laid the book of spells she'd found in the library carefully on the floor, studying the incantations and drawings again. She ought to be able to adjust the size of the stone without altering the composition of the walls, if she'd read it correctly. If she did do something dangerous and made this section of wall waver, then the stones would tell her. Luna smiled. It was so nice, being able to listen to what things said. She was always surprised, and not a little saddened, that more people didn't try it for themselves.

She aimed her wand at the stone and whispered, "Aliquantus."

A stream of pink light shot out of her wand and circled the block. It shuddered, and then began to resize itself. Luna watched with her breath bated, her wand moving back and forth now and then so that she could speed the shrinking of one side or slow the growth of another. The stone's cries of distress grew fainter and fainter, until it was finally a shape and size that worked well with the other stones. Luna ended the spell and reached out, running her fingers gently down it.

"Luna?"

Harry was there. Of course he was. He had the map of the school, and so he could find her if he wanted. Luna turned around and nodded to him. "Harry. You want your Christmas present now."

Harry paused as if startled, and then used his hand to push the glasses up his nose. "Er. No, I—I didn't know you had one for me, Luna." The Omen snake draped around his shoulders, whom Luna often saw in the Ravenclaw common room, cocked his head to look at her and uttered a long hiss. Harry hissed back, then listened to the response, and muffled a chuckle. "But Argutus says that I would be a fool not to accept it," he added.

"Of course you would," said Luna, and reached into a pocket of her robes, filtering her fingers past scraps of parchment and pebbles that she'd picked up because they remembered interesting things. She found the cord of the necklace she'd braided for Harry, and pulled it out. "These are gyrfalcon feathers," she told Harry. "Powerful protection, you know."

"Against what?"

He is annoyingly specific sometimes, Luna thought, but she was willing to forgive him for that. Most people tended to be annoyingly specific, unless they learned how to listen. "Against rumors and bad ideas," she said firmly, and then waited until he bowed his head so she could drape the necklace around his neck. Harry touched it lightly and smiled.

"I have a necklace for you, too, Luna," he said, and brought it out.

Luna reached out and took it, enchanted. The cord was of a thread she'd never seen before, but it had come from a robe in the first place—perhaps a piece of clothing from one of Harry's Black houses, of the kind that nobody wove any more. There were sunflower petals hanging on the cord, charmed to stay fresh. Sunflowers were a way of wishing someone good luck, Luna knew, the ability to flare brilliantly even in the midst of wind and crisis. She was pleased Harry had thought of them.

But what made it very special was that Harry had braided pieces of his own hair among the flower petals. Luna touched one dark curl, and nodded. It gave her visions of being on Harry's head and bobbing and dipping as he soared past a Bludger. It was very brave of him, giving this up, when one's hair could be used against one in so many dangerous potions and spells.

"Thank you, Harry," she said. She Levitated the necklace up over her head and settled it at her throat. That way, it would be light and airy in the future, and less likely to strangle her. "I wish you good luck at conquering the Rotfang Conspiracy."

For just a moment, Harry looked confused. But he didn't pursue the matter and then look bored by her explanation, which Luna had known to happen many times, and which always disappointed her. Conspiracies were like objects; they would be much more fascinating if people just listened. "Thanks, Luna," he said. "Good luck at—adjusting the size of rocks in the tunnels?"

"Yes," said Luna. "The Founders didn't always put Hogwarts together right, you know. Sometimes there's a sound of a stone crying out in pain, or a room crying because people are practicing too many of the same kinds of spells in it. Then I have to help." She gave Harry a severe glance. Even he wasn't beyond censure for this kind of thing. "Your own robes would be pleased if you could get a left hand. They're tired of flopping over your left wrist."

"Er," said Harry.

Luna listened for a moment, then smiled. “Oh, but you are planning to get a left hand,” she said. “That’s good. And Harry? I’m very pleased that you and Draco Malfoy are sharing a bed. That’s nice for both of you. Are you redistributing your weight evenly across it when you bounce? Because that’s important, you know, to be sure that the bed doesn’t always get tired of having the same weight on every spring.”

Harry's face was very red. Luna wondered in concern if a Heat Flea had bitten him. She was about to offer the incantation that could check when Harry said, in a strangled voice, "Happy Christmas, Luna," and beat a retreat.

Luna made a careful note to check for Heat Fleas later, and went back to work.

SS

Harry woke slowly. He nearly panicked for a moment, before remembering they didn't have to hurry to Silver-Mirror; instead, he, Draco, Connor, Peter, Owen, Syrix, and Snape had come to Silver-Mirror last night, had a late dinner with Narcissa, and gone to bed. Draco had said that he didn't want to run around in the morning the way they'd had to do last year, and this was better.

His turning over and stretching woke Draco, who liked to sleep with both arms and legs tucked around him lately, as if he were a monkey. It made Harry think words like “adorable,” which he didn’t share aloud. Draco liked to be told he was beautiful, but there were certain lines to be drawn even in that.

“Happy Christmas,” Draco whispered, and leaned forward to snog him.

Harry returned it eagerly enough. He didn't know what time it was, and he wasn't about to look away from the kiss to cast a Tempus charm. He rolled slowly over so that he lay half on top of Draco, and slipped one hand under his pyjama shirt.

The door flung open.

Harry made a muffled shriek, and, luckily, drew back before he could bite Draco's tongue, though it was a near thing. He turned around and glared at Connor, who stood in the doorway with red and white sparks leaping from his wand, grinning like Sirius in a really good mood.

“What are you doing?” Harry demanded.

“What is he doing?” Draco said at approximately the same moment, attempting to hide his nakedness behind Harry. Harry clasped his hand and glared at his brother, who didn’t go away.

“It’s time to come downstairs and open gifts,” Connor announced solemnly. “And I knew that you were awake because I saw Draco go outside earlier.” He nodded to Draco as casually as if they were already brothers-in-law and Connor walked in on scenes like this all the time. “You went outside to watch the sunrise with your mother, didn’t you? A beautiful custom. And one that makes you wake up early. I was generous and let you have an extra three hours of sleep. You should thank me, really. All this lying around in bed all day doesn’t get gifts opened.”

He shut the door with a bang. Harry blinked at Draco. Draco blinked at Harry.

"I suppose we should go downstairs," said Harry reluctantly. "Or he's liable to come back in here."

SS

Connor leaned against the doorway in the hall and tried to keep his laughter down. He wondered how long it would be before Harry and Draco worked out that he had a ward up which alerted him when they were getting too “intimate,” so that he could innocently interrupt them.

It had taken him only a few days to work out that just because he couldn't antagonize Draco any more didn't mean he had to have less fun. He now had a brother to tease. If he was having sex, Harry obviously wasn't that fragile on the subject any more, and he could take a lot of teasing. At the same time, he was unlikely to tease back

for a while, until he grew more comfortable with the notion that he was not only having sex, other people knew that he was.

Connor liked to think of it as part of his brotherly duties in making sure that Harry could have at least a somewhat sane and normal life.

He trotted downstairs, chortling, and met the impatient gazes around the tree with a satisfied smile. "They should be down soon," he said.

And if they aren't, then I'll take Snape with me when I fetch them.

SS

Harry watched Connor's face closely as his magic Levitated gifts from under the trees, slinging them to their owners. He saw his brother blink and let his face fall a little when he realized that Harry apparently had no gift for him.

“Sorry for not putting this with the others, Connor,” Harry said, clearly enough that everyone heard. “But there’s no way that you wouldn’t have guessed immediately what it was, no matter how hard I tried to wrap it.” He turned his attention to the doorway and sent out a silent Accio. Connor’s gift hurried from the obscure room where Harry had put it, one close beside Neptune Black’s paintings of other worlds, and through the doorway.

Connor's face when he saw it made everything worthwhile—even, Harry thought, his interrupting them this morning. His hands trembled as he settled the Firebolt on his lap and stroked it, and his glance towards Harry had turned so bright that it really seemed to outshine most of what was in the room.

Harry grinned. "Happy Christmas, Connor."

Connor gazed dreamily at the broom, as he might have at Parvati. Harry leaned back against Draco's shoulder, and just barely restrained the impulse to kiss him, not wanting to look away from his brother's glowing face. It had been obvious that Connor was jealous of his Firebolt, though he'd tried not to be. And why shouldn't he have

a good broom? He was playing Quidditch this year, while Harry wasn't. He both needed and wanted it more.

"That cost lots of Galleons," Draco hissed in his ear. "Even now."

"Yes," Harry agreed simply.

"Mine should be at least as good," Draco said firmly.

Harry raised himself on his elbow so he could see Draco's face. "It's not as expensive," he said. "But I think it's even better. Money isn't the only measure of worth, Draco. You've helped teach me that as much as anyone else."

Draco blinked, looking both stunned and cautiously pleased, and then unwrapped his gift. Harry watched his face for the moment when he realized what it was. There it was—the flicker of a line across his brow, a sharply indrawn breath, and shadows in his eyes.

"A Pensive," he whispered. "But it's already full."

Harry nodded. The Pensieve had a containment spell on it that kept the silver liquid inside from sliding out. "It's my memories of some of the most painful times in my life," he said. "And the most joyful." He thought of the perfect wording a moment later, and shook his head ruefully. "The most intense, perhaps I should say. And it's bound to that spell you invented, the one that lets you go inside someone else's memory and feel their mindset."

Draco's stare at him demanded more information.

Harry kissed him, not caring for the fact that Draco's mother and his guardian sat right across the room. "I've still hidden some things from you," he whispered. "The way I felt about my parents' trial, for example. And some others were always mysterious. I don't think you've ever really understood the way I felt about Connor in first year. I don't want those to be secrets anymore, Draco. So here you are. Whatever you want to know about me, it should be in there. If it isn't, ask."

Draco made an incoherent noise and set the Pensieve aside before lunging forward and seizing him in a kiss. Harry almost let himself be pushed flat before he heard Snape clear his throat.

“Perhaps,” Snape said, in a voice so dry it reminded Harry of a desert, “we can continue with this undignified orgy of gift-giving and save the other parts of the undignified orgy for later?”

Harry heard Connor laugh, and had his suspicions about the way his brother had come bursting in on them that morning. He sat back up, clearing his throat, and trying to smooth his hair flat, while he looked at Snape. Understanding the silent command, Snape opened the wrapped package in his lap.

He went very still.

Harry took a deep breath. This was another of those risky gifts, like the forgiveness letter he’d written to Snape last year. It seemed that their relationship was doomed to be so volatile they’d never give each other normal presents. Of course, Harry thought, if they did reach the sock-trading stage they would probably be on the verge of never speaking to one another again.

Snape opened the book, and flipped through it, looking, it seemed, at each page, or at least each clump of pages. Harry waited, his heart loud in his throat and Draco’s hand on his shoulder, just at that moment, most welcome.

“Some of these pages near the end are blank,” Snape said at last.

Harry cleared his throat. “Ah—those are supposed to be for you to write what works well for us,” he said. “And I have no doubt that you could write a book of your own on the subject, at this point.”

Snape met his eyes. Harry looked back as fearlessly as he could when fear was trying to eat him alive. The gift—a book called, *What To Do With a Powerful Wizard: Handling Relationships Between Magically Strong Parents and Children*—was less literal and more symbolic. Harry hoped the symbolism, of his desire to consider Snape a parent and not just a guardian, was actually obvious.

From Snape's small smile a moment later, he supposed it was either so, or Snape had read the reason out of his eyes with Legilimency.

"Thank you, Harry." Snape put the book aside. The gesture might have looked casual to anyone else, but Harry had seen the way his hands were trembling. He relaxed.

The other gifts went more easily; He'd got books for Peter, Narcissa, Owen, and Syrinx, all on various subjects. Peter's was the one that might have been most sensitive, given that it documented wood-carving techniques developed in the years he was in Azkaban, but it only made him caress the cover and look wistful. Syrinx had already opened her book, which was about advanced training for war wizards, and didn't look inclined to pay attention to anything else.

That done, the rest of the gift-giving could begin. Harry wasn't very surprised to open a book on art appreciation from Peter. Now that he could see beauty in physical objects, he suspected Peter would patiently tutor him into seeing beauty in wooden carvings, paintings, murals, and the like. Harry wondered if his days of draining pretty but useless Black artifacts for their magic were over.

Narcissa gave him a curious object that felt heavy in Harry's arms, but slipped and slithered as he unrolled it, so that it took him a long moment to see what it really was. He smiled, embarrassed, over the top of it when he caught a glimpse of "Sirius" and "Regulus" and realized its nature: a copy of the Black family tapestry with his name added. It wasn't magical, so it wouldn't change to reflect the living and dead status of members of the family as the original did, but it did show him bound to Regulus with a dashed silver line, as adopted heir.

"Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy," he said, and she corrected him to Narcissa before he really finished, glancing at him severely. Harry could almost see the wheels in her head turning. If he will acknowledge himself as adopted Black heir, perhaps he will begin to acknowledge himself as my son-in-law.

The tapestry was a beautiful gift, woven from some pure black fabric Harry didn't know and with the names done in silver, but it made

Harry miss Regulus something fierce. He put it carefully aside before he turned to the next gift, Owen's.

It was a wooden plaque, empty but for what looked like a depiction of the most recent generation of Rosier-Henlins. Harry blinked at it, then turned to look at Owen in puzzlement.

Owen met his gaze calmly enough. "My mother is pregnant," he said. "I told you that. She's due to deliver in three months. She'd like you to be godfather for the child, Harry. Or—well, if you'll accept, something a bit more permanent than that. An office much like the one you're performing for Marian Bulstrode, where you show my little sibling from the first day he or she exists that powerful magic isn't something to be feared, or revered. The world's changing. My mother wants her daughter or son to grow up in the world as it is, not as it was."

Harry thought he knew what the plaque was. "And if I agree, then it changes to reflect my new status in relation to your family?"

Owen nodded.

Harry went on looking at him for a moment more. He hadn't had as much time to spend with his sworn companions as he'd like. He still barely knew Syrix. And he hadn't known Michael well enough to prevent the situation that arose with Draco. It was something he'd like to change.

"Thank you, Owen," he said at last. "I'd be honored." He faced the plaque and breathed on it, vaguely remembering that he had to do something like that. Some of the plaques were so sensitive that they picked up the magic from the sound of the words alone, but most needed a more concentrated blast of air. "I accept."

The plaque shimmered, and an invisible hand carved his name into the wood. Harry was startled to see that three lines appeared with it. One dashed one linked him to Medusa's name, and Harry guessed that would be the one signifying his choice to stand in for the child. A thicker, curvier one curled from him to Owen—the sworn companion bond. Harry had no clue what to make of the thin line that curled

about the spot on the plaque beneath Medusa and Charles that the child's name would presumably fill.

Owen came and looked over his shoulder. "Oh," he said, sounding surprised. "I didn't know my mother did that. She evidently wants you to name the child."

"She what?" Harry was immediately apprehensive. The thought of saddling a wizarding child with something unfortunate for the rest of his or her life immediately filled his thoughts. What if he did it wrong? What if he violated some naming tradition in the Rosier-Henlin family that he knew nothing about? What if—

Owen's hand squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. "Don't worry about it," he murmured. "I'm sure you'll do just fine."

Harry, though not so sure, nodded, and opened Syrinx's gift. A shoe? After a moment, Harry understood. War wizards were supposed to own few possessions, at least during this stage of their training. Like independent action and unimpeded emotion, the right to them was something they gave up, and then regained at the end of their training. Syrinx would give some of her possessions as gifts, as much to say that she valued the people who received them as for any practical benefit.

When he looked at Syrinx, she was smiling at him. "It's charmed to leap up and kick your enemies in the jaw," she said. "It should break the jaw if I did the charm right." A tremor of anxiety crossed her brow. "I'm sure I did."

"Uh—thanks." Harry set the shoe cautiously on top of the Rosier-Henlin plaque. Luckily, it didn't appear to think the plaque was an enemy.

From Connor, he received a watch made of bronze, which whirled with three-dimensional representations of the planets when he opened it. Connor grinned at him. "Brilliant, isn't it?" he asked. "I found it in Lux Aeterna, behind a ward. It lets the current Potter heir know when the bearer is in danger."

“And what else?” Harry could feel a good deal of concentrated magic in the watch, though not clearly enough to tell what it did.

Connor shrugged, more interested in Peter’s gift for him, a book on Animagus training. “Don’t know.”

Harry thought it wouldn’t be a good idea to wear the watch as yet. He wrapped it around the shoe, then took a good look at the gifts from Snape and Draco.

Looking told him nothing. Snape had filled his box with soft parchment, from the sound, so that Harry couldn’t tell what it was from the shape. He opened it, and exclaimed softly. “I didn’t think you brewed this, sir,” he said, tilting the vial he uncovered from side to side. The golden shine clearly proclaimed the potion to be Felix Felicis, which Harry had never tried to make himself; one slight mistake in the brewing and things would go even worse than they usually did with a volatile potion.

Snape snorted.

Harry glanced at him, and was surprised to note a faint red tinge to his cheeks. He’s...embarrassed? “Thank you, sir,” he said. “Really.”

Snape nodded stiffly and looked away. Harry decided he shouldn’t call any more attention to it. Snape was against potions like Felix Felicis as much as he was against love potions, at least on the surface; he might not be fair, but that didn’t mean he would approve of a luck brew that was essentially a way of cheating the odds. Harry carefully slid the vial back into its parchment, and tried to bury his own emotions, as he thought about what it meant that Snape believed that and yet had brewed the potion anyway.

When he opened Draco’s gift, he didn’t understand at first. The object hummed with concentrated magic, but it appeared to be a perfectly ordinary mirror. Harry turned it back and forth, and still could see only his own face in it. The frame was beautiful, carved ivory with small curlicues around tiny pearls, but had no sigil or lettering that said what it did. Harry gave Draco a doubtful look.

Draco smiled at him, and cupped his hand around the back of Harry's neck, bending his face towards the mirror. "There," he breathed. "What do you see?"

Harry peered close, obediently, muttering under his breath the whole while. "Just myself," he said.

And then he gasped as the image rippled and changed, and color appeared to flow from the side, where Draco had just touched the frame. What was left, when the ripples settled, was—

No.

Harry tried to put the mirror down. Draco wouldn't let him, wouldn't release his grip on either the frame or the nape of Harry's neck. His murmuring in Harry's ear sounded half-feverish.

"Yes. That's what I see when I look at you, Harry. When just one person is touching it, it reflects what that person thinks of the object in the glass. But when someone else touches it, then it asserts his reality. And you're beautiful to me. You are." Draco kissed his ear.

Harry tried to turn away from the image, but it was hard. The face—that wasn't his. It couldn't be. It irradiated his eyes, his hair, practically his skin with light as he had thought darkness irradiated Draco's face on the day of the Justification. He was fascinated by the picture, but it wasn't him. It couldn't be.

He buried his face in Draco's robe, overwhelmed.

"It's all right, Harry," Draco crooned into his ear. "Take as long as you need to get used to this." His free hand swept over Harry's forehead, tugging at his hair now and then. "We've already started on that road. You can admit I'm beautiful. I've seen you staring at some things as if noticing them for the first time. It'll come, Harry. You might even acknowledge yourself as beautiful in a few years without prompting, but I want you to know exactly how I see you."

Harry managed to murmur his thanks, though still without looking up. He was half-afraid to meet Draco's eyes at this moment, and see the burning, possessive pleasure in them.

Draco kissed him again. “Happy Christmas,” he said into Harry’s skin, more than his ear.

Connor saved the moment, or at least saved his brother from making a right idiot of himself. "We still have some time before the others come," he said brightly, impatiently. And he was right, Harry knew; his other allies would be arriving later that afternoon, delaying because they wanted to spend Christmas morning with their own families or, in Hawthorn's case, because last night had been the full moon and she would need time to recover. "Let's go flying in the wind-pool!"

Harry choked, especially when he heard Draco's indignant mutter about not having a broom behind him. He kissed Draco's chest and sat up, still careful to avoid both his boyfriend's eyes and the mirror. Some changes were harder than others.

SS

Harry woke that night with a start. For a long moment, he lay in his bed, skin tingling, and tried to think what could have awakened him. It wasn't Draco, who rushed soft snores into his ear without moving. And it definitely wasn't Connor sneaking in to play a prank; when Harry chanced a look at the door, it was firmly closed.

But something had changed.

A bit unnerved, and wondering if someone had managed to Apparate in past Silver-Mirror's wards, Harry rolled gently from under Draco's guardian arm. Draco turned and hugged the pillow instead. Harry lingered to stroke his cheek and shake his head; he would be back, hopefully, before the cold woke Draco up.

He made his way carefully down the stairs. The celebration with his allies had been louder and more raucous than Harry had expected, if only because Thomas had brought his children along, and Marian Bulstrode could walk now. A child nearly two years old with accidental

magic not fully under control, and utterly unafraid of any Black artifacts or magic from the adults, could, Harry had discovered, get into quite a bit of trouble. And then Thomas had stayed for a long time talking about how he had received an invitation to visit Malfoy Manor from Lucius, but had not gone because he was busy writing an article on centaur magic and in the midst of some delicate research. It had been entertaining, but had distracted Harry from helping to clean up the rubbish. He hoped nothing had been left on the stairs.

He reached the main room of Silver-Mirror, lit as always by the golden pool overhead that forever sent its drops of flame down to fill the lamps, and looked cautiously about. No one lunged out of the shadows at him brandishing a wand. Harry frowned.

Then he heard a voice, familiar and not heard in far too long, say, "Harry?"

Heart pounding, he turned. Regulus stood next to one of the paintings, his hand resting lightly on the wall beside it, his face widening into a smile as Harry watched.

He might have repeated Harry's name, but if so, Harry didn't hear it, since he'd practically levitated across the room and gathered Regulus into a hug. Regulus lost his breath, then got it back again long enough to laugh, and returned the embrace.

Harry buried his head against Regulus's chest, silly tears of gratitude making his shirt damp. He hadn't dared think too much about what was probably happening to Regulus in the world of the paintings. He was gone, and there was nothing Harry could do to help him but make sure the Black houses and artifacts were taken care of properly in the meantime. No way to reach him, no way to know if he had succeeded or failed in his quests to heal from the infection around his Dark Mark and to find out what the Slytherin locket had been to Voldemort.

No way to know, but now he was back, alive, warm, real, in Harry's arms. He was back.

Regulus chuckled above him. "I was automatically trying to read your thoughts and learn what had happened since I was last home," he whispered. "Sometimes I forget that I have a body, even now."

"I'll tell you," said Harry, pulling back and staring into his face, dazed with joy. "I'll be happy to tell you. But you tell me something first." He took a deep breath. "Did your healing go well?"

"It did." Regulus's face was shadowed for a moment, but it couldn't restrain the smile that burst forth. "The infection in my Mark is cured."

"Then I don't care about anything else right now," Harry said firmly, and clung to him again.

He knew Regulus had probably had disturbing things happen to him, and found disturbing things out. It was there in the shadows around his eyes and his mouth if nowhere else. And he knew he probably wouldn't like hearing some of those things, that Regulus might be the bearer of bad news.

For now, he didn't care. He didn't care about anything but the fact that Regulus was there, one heavy hand stroking his spine, here and back and home.

Chapter Fifty-Six: Horcruxes

"But he might not be the real Regulus." Draco sounded calm, but it was obvious that his voice wavered on the edge of breaking apart into shards of anger and concern.

Harry snorted and looked over his shoulder. He'd been trying to adjust his robe in such a way that the collar hid all the bite marks on his neck, and in the end, he'd had to give up. Some of them were simply too high. And now he needed to stop thinking about how he'd received them, or he was going to have a problem on his hands. He gave a little shudder and focused his mind. "I suppose that he's the unreal Regulus then?"

Draco crossed the room and put his hands on Harry's shoulders, staring into his eyes. "You don't know what he might have encountered in those paintings," he said. "You said yourself that you didn't know exactly how they worked or where they led."

"No one does, though," Harry pointed out. "None of the Blacks ever explored them completely. Regulus knows the functions of a few—the one where he originally learned of the locket, for example, and the painting where he went to be healed. He told me it was dangerous at the time. I still agreed to let him go, since his infected Dark Mark was more of a threat to his life than anything else could be at that point. And I'm sure that if there was a danger of one of them sending back a copy of him that only looked and moved and spoke and felt like the real thing, he would have told me."

"Maybe he didn't know," Draco pointed out quietly, and ran his finger over the bite mark low on the side of Harry's neck. Harry bit his tongue to keep from responding. "Did you see what painting he came out of?"

Harry shook his head. "I only felt a twitch in the wards, and woke up and went down to see what had happened. He was standing in the gallery when I turned around. What I felt was him returning."

Draco tucked his arms around Harry and put his chin on his shoulder. "I still want to sit with you when you meet with him, to learn this

important information, whatever it is,” he said. “Will you let me do that?”

“Of course,” said Harry, and kept to himself the thought that Draco could have achieved that without all these ridiculous suspicions about Regulus.

He knew that was Regulus. Apart from anything else, he had felt the way the wards danced around him, spinning a web to welcome the Black heir back into the houses. Harry was legal heir, but Regulus had a history of blood and magic with Silver-Mirror, had spent hours of his childhood here, and knew the paintings with a bone-deep wisdom that Harry hadn't had the need to experience yet. It was inevitable that the house would rejoice to see him come back, and would reject an impostor, or at least let Harry know from its reaction that he wasn't the true Regulus.

Sometimes, Draco is simply too paranoid.

SS

Snape had gone very still when Harry told him that morning that Regulus had returned, and in some part of himself, he did not think the stillness had ended, even though he had stood up and moved around the room more than once since then. He had not gone down for breakfast, not that anyone would compel him to the morning after Christmas. He had spent most of his time sitting on his chair and staring out the window that gave an enchanted view of a small wood crowded with leafless trees.

Someone knocked on his door.

Snape took a deep breath, and shook his head, and stood. He had avoided Regulus because he did not want the other man to see the past written in his eyes. Snape had lived through scenes in his dreams that made him wary of how he would behave around Regulus. He had lived one life in these last few months, and Regulus had lived another. It was not fair to expect Regulus to act as Snape would inevitably expect him to act, not fair to saddle a friend with memories

of the time when their friendship had been different from what it was now.

Joseph would undoubtedly say he was being cowardly. But Joseph was not here.

Snape opened the door, and nodded to Regulus. Regulus gave him a smile that lit his gray eyes as though he were the second coming of Sirius Black playing a prank. That steadied Snape, a little. If he thought of Regulus as an incarnation of his brother, he could retain an emotional distance from him.

“Severus.” And then Regulus did the impossible, and hugged him.

Snape stood rigid for long moments before he realized Regulus was not going to stop the embrace until he returned it. Uncomfortable, he did so, and then slipped free of his arms as soon as he could.

“Severus?”

Snape wished he would stop using that name. It reminded him too keenly of the dreams. But he wished even more that he was not acting like such a coward, so he turned around and nodded to Regulus, and let himself smile the creaky almost-smile he had achieved in the weeks before Regulus went into the paintings. “Hello.”

“You made me wait long enough for that.” Regulus went sprawling into one of the room’s large padded chairs. Snape could almost hear the ghosts of Slytherin Prefects gone scolding him for his inability to maintain a proper posture. “Harry’s told me a little about the Midsummer battle and the Sanctuary, but he said that the parts concerning you were yours to tell. So. Talk.” He fixed a demanding gaze on Snape.

Snape took a seat across from him. Perhaps he could last through this, after all. At the very least, he would make Regulus see why he was acting so strangely, and, perhaps, in common agreement, they could find their way back to a common footing.

"The Sanctuary forces healing on those who come to it," he said, and heard his sneer soak his voice. "Whether or not they want it."

"But you needed it," said Regulus.

Snape breathed through his teeth, and was reminded of why he had always found it particularly difficult to talk to Regulus in this mood. Sirius Black had a malicious edge to his amusement, not so far from what a Slytherin might achieve. Regulus was no wide-eyed innocent, but he could and did act obtuse to subtler meanings, as now, and cling to what he saw as reality.

"Whether or not I needed it is hardly the question," Snape said sharply. "I had lived without it."

"Not well."

His teeth ground down hard enough to make an audible noise, and Regulus gave a low whistle of sympathy. "It must have been hard," he said, bouncing one hand up and down on his knee, "to be with people you could neither bedazzle with your bollocks about being fine nor scare away."

Snape wished he knew the actual Evil Eye, the ancient ability to harm someone through a baleful gaze. "I had dreams," he said. "I could have taken Dreamless Sleep to avoid them. I did not. But they were hard to bear."

"Dreams?" Regulus tilted his head, eyebrows raising.

"Memories." Snape told him something he would have preferred to keep to himself, then, because he could not stand the sharply skeptical expression on Regulus's face, as though dreams should be something anyone could bear. "Memories of the time I spent as a Death Eater, in fact. Currently, I've dreamed myself to the point where you went after that damned locket and the Dark Lord tortured me because he thought I knew something about it."

Regulus sucked in a startled breath and sat back in his chair. Snape's bitter satisfaction at having made an impact on him did not last for

long. This was a weakness, a crack in his façade. He should have borne it in silence. He did not want Regulus knowing of this. Joseph was the utmost audience he could tolerate for the dreams, and Joseph knew what they meant and talked through them with him. Snape turned away.

“You know why I didn’t tell you anything,” Regulus whispered, his voice amazingly soft. “You know, Severus. I wasn’t sure of your loyalties, and I had to succeed, but it was more than that. I didn’t want you to suffer death or worse torture than you did if you had known something and not been able to keep it away from his Legilimency.”

“By that time,” Snape said, not looking at him, “I had concealed from him that I had reported to the Order of the Phoenix for more than a year.”

Regulus snorted. “Concealed it so well I had no idea.” His hand made a sharp impact on something that was either the chair arm or the useless, delicate ornamental table some idiot had thought to stand beside the chair. “You were an excellent actor, Severus, remember? It’s just that sometimes you chose to deploy those skills against your friends as well as your enemies, and when that happened, then no one could tell the difference. Friend or enemy.”

He cut off. Snape sat in silence, staring at the floor. He could feel Regulus staring at him.

“I’m sorry for your having to relive that,” Regulus offered at last, quietly. “But, believe me, Severus, I don’t think you’re weak for doing that, and I don’t care how it influences your behavior towards me.”

Snape could feel his shoulders tense.

“We’re friends,” said Regulus. “We were friends then, even though you never wanted to call it so. And we’re friends now. I just came back from—from learning disturbing things, disturbing things that I’m about to go tell Harry.” The note of sorrow slipping into his voice was so deep that Snape had no choice but to turn and look at him. His face was tired, long circles slipping under his eyes like afternoon shadows. “I want a friend. I need a friend.”

“I am changed,” Snape warned him, with some difficulty, and then reconsidered. “No. I am changing. I am not comfortable company—“

“When were you ever?” And Regulus had the gall to smile at him.

Snape shook his head, frustrated. “No. I was such uncomfortable company for a time that I struck at one of Harry’s werewolves, Regulus. And I acted not like his guardian, but like another helpless child that Harry had to take care of. We’re making steps back in the direction of father and son now, but—“

"I know you're changing," Regulus interrupted him, calm. "Everyone changes all the time, Severus. What's finally happened is that you've been forced to notice." He offered his arm. "Now. I know Draco will have insisted on hearing what I have to say to Harry. I think it's only appropriate that his father should be there with him, too, to comfort him in this time of crisis."

Snape rolled his eyes, but took Regulus's elbow. If he did not, he knew Regulus would follow him down the stairs, stubbornly offering his arm all the way and making him look absolutely ridiculous.

Then his ears caught up with his brain, and he halted. “What time of crisis?” he demanded, his eyes flitting over Regulus’s face. “What exactly did you learn in those paintings?”

Regulus gave a faint, bitter smile more like his old self as a Death Eater than Severus had seen in years—at least in waking life. “Bad news,” he said.

SS

Regulus had asked to speak to him in one of Silver-Mirror's studies, this one devoted to books on Dark applications for Light spells. Harry had largely stripped one particular shelf on healing magic, when he had thought that the Death Eaters might try to turn healing spells against them on the battlefield, but the other books were still there. Harry circled them, looking for something interesting, while Draco remained near the door, seated in a chair that faced it.

A loud gasp from him made Harry whirl around, his magic flaring. He saw Snape and Regulus paused in the doorway, staring at Draco, who had risen to his feet and aimed his wand.

At Regulus, Harry realized, in exasperation. He sighed and took a step forward. "Draco—"

"Look at the floor, Harry." Draco's voice was tight and strangled. "At his shadow."

Harry looked. He blinked when he realized that Regulus's shadow did seem thin and stretched, but that was probably the effect of the numerous lamps that lit the study. He shrugged. "What? Draco, I don't—"

Regulus took a step forward.

Harry saw it then. Regulus's shadow followed him obediently, like a good shadow should, but it did not have a human form anymore. Instead, a black dog paced him.

A Grim. Omen of death.

Harry raised his eyes to Regulus's face and stared. Regulus had stopped walking, and was gazing calmly at him, ignoring Draco's wand, ignoring the way that Snape had disengaged his arm and stepped away from him, snarling.

"I was always going to tell you about this," Regulus began. "I just didn't think last night was the appropriate time. I wanted last night to be a time of joy, Harry, for a few hours." His smile was the saddest Harry had ever seen him give. "Before the joy had to pass."

"He's lying," Draco hissed. "He's not the real Regulus. Look at him, Harry. Would the real Regulus ever sound that way? Look like that?"

Harry stood gazing into Regulus's eyes instead of answering Draco. And he still saw the light he was looking for in those gray eyes, the

spark of the man he knew. He was still sure this was the real Regulus, but—

“He would if he had to grow up, Draco,” Harry said softly, never breaking eye contact with Regulus. “If he met something in the paintings that changed his world as he knew it.” He paused a long moment, then said, “But you should explain the dog shadow.”

“I will.” Regulus moved to stand in front of a triangle of chairs. “If you gentlemen will sit down?”

Snape did, but with a look of profound and personal betrayal on his face that made Harry wince and glance away. Draco remained standing. Harry stepped up behind him and put his hand on Draco’s right shoulder, stroking gently and murmuring nonsense soothing words. Draco shuddered and tipped onto his heels, molding his back to Harry’s chest. He didn’t lower the wand, but at least Harry was sure he would no longer fire a curse at a moment’s notice.

He nodded at Regulus.

Regulus took a deep breath and reached for his left sleeve, jerking it up. Then he held out his arm and turned it to face Harry.

Harry had feared to see the Dark Mark radiating with lines of infection, not cured after all, even though Regulus had told him last night it was. But the Mark wasn’t radiating anything. It would have been difficult for that to happen when the Mark was gone.

Instead, the same sleek black as the snake and skull had been, a dog stalked Regulus’s left forearm. The design was incredibly well-drawn, Harry had to admit. He could see individual bits of fur, and the dog’s—the Grim’s—eyes were dark pits it was uncomfortable to look at.

“The first painting cured me of my infection,” Regulus said softly. “That was quite true, Harry. The second—” He cast a glance at Draco and Snape. “There is little I can tell you about its nature in front of people who aren’t the Black heirs. I told you that it was called the execution picture.”

"It killed you, then," Draco said, and started pulling against Harry's hand again, trying to get between him and Regulus. "It killed you and sent your dead body back in place of the real Regulus. I knew it."

Regulus's face registered surprise for a moment, before he barked laughter. Harry thought the echoes went on a bit too long, as if there were a dog howling somewhere, faint and far away. "You take me for an Inferius? No, Draco. I did not die. I met Death."

"What was it like?" Harry asked, unable to keep his eyes from moving back and forth between Regulus's dog shadow and dog Mark.

"As I said, I'm limited in what I can tell you with this audience," Regulus murmured. "But in this case, the appropriate word is she. She is female in that world the painting leads to, Harry. And very, very cruel."

He shuddered, and then shook his head and announced, "If neither of you is going to sit down, I will." He took the chair nearest Snape, not seeming to notice the other man's fixed stare. Draco's wand tracked him. Harry tried to step away and sit down in the other chair, but Draco's free hand tightened on his robe collar. Harry rolled his eyes and stood still. If it makes him feel better.

"She changed your shadow and your Mark?" Harry asked.

Regulus nodded. "So I couldn't forget our bargain. She made me a trade, Harry. I can't tell you all the terms. As I said, wrong audience. But she gave me the knowledge I sought, in return for this." He held up his left arm again, and the Grim seemed to writhe and bend as Harry watched. "I'm marked as Death's own, now. When I feel the call in the Mark, I have to obey it." He took a deep breath, visibly bracing himself. "When she calls me on to die, I have to go."

Harry clenched his fist, making Draco murmur and shift at the tight hold Harry had on his robe. "And is it the necromancer's gift?" he asked. "Do you know when you're going to die, and you just can't tell us?"

Regulus shook his head at once. “No, Harry. Not that. She could call me in five minutes, or a hundred years from now. I promise. I’m not lying about this.” He dredged up a smile that Harry felt compelled to accept as truthful. He did not think even Regulus could look that cheerful about a death he knew would happen soon, and he had never noticed any signs that Regulus was a very good liar. Even his keeping the truth of the locket secret when he was a Death Eater had involved more lies of omission, from what Harry knew, than commission. “So it’s not really all that different from what anyone else knows or feels about his or her death. This is just—a bit more personal interest in the matter than most people get handed.”

Harry nodded, and tried to ignore the pulse beating in his throat. “And she gave you the knowledge you sought.”

“Yes.”

“What was it? Were the locket and the diary weapons of Voldemort’s, or were they something else?”

Regulus bowed his head and took hold of the arms of his chair. Then he looked up and spoke in a soft, flat voice Harry thought he must have practiced.

“They’re called Horcruxes, Harry. They’re physical objects containing a bit of the creator’s soul. Extremely Dark magic. They can only be empowered by a murder. The murder splits the creator’s soul, and he takes that shard and stores it in—well, an object that he’s enchanted to be indestructible, hopefully. The shards can take on an independent life of their own, and usually do. That’s why you met Tom Riddle in that diary, and why a bit of Voldemort could possess my brother. Horcruxes are alive, and not just in the way that a family clock or a Foe-Glass is. They’re fully as intelligent and aware as any human. They won’t know everything their creator knows. Tom Riddle was sixteen when Voldemort made the diary, so sixteen he remained. But they can learn new things, and if they can commune with or possess someone new, they can try to return to independent existence by growing a body.”

Harry closed his eyes. He remembered the grayish lump growing out of Sirius's side, the possession that Sirius had killed himself to prevent. He remembered Tom Riddle trying to drain Connor's magic, and Harry's, so that he could live outside the pages of the diary, or someone else's mind, again. Oh, yes, he knew all about Horcruxes needing, or wanting, a body.

"That's the way Voldemort's stayed immortal," Regulus went on, voice quiet, implacable. "The Horcruxes each contain a piece of his soul, and his body holds the last. Death showed me the number seven. That makes sense. Seven is a magically powerful number. He split his soul into seven shards—one each for six Horcruxes, and one for himself. It's impossible for him to leave his body without a piece, of course. And that's how he survived when you reflected the Killing Curse at him, Harry. You destroyed his body, and an ordinary Killing Curse would have dispersed the soul, but that particular shard remaining was too small to be affected by it. It fled and hid, and possessed Quirrell—made him into a Horcrux, almost, except that this bit of soul was more intelligent and older than the others, and always knew exactly what had happened to it. Now he's come back in full power, but still containing only a shard of a soul."

Harry opened his eyes again to see Regulus regarding him solemnly. "That's why the Avada Kedavra you tried on him in the Chamber of Secrets didn't work, Harry. He'll still live—if you can call that living—as long as one of his Horcruxes exists."

"So we have to find and destroy the others," Harry said.

Regulus nodded.

"Four more."

Regulus nodded again.

Harry shuddered a bit. The battles with Tom Riddle and the bit of Voldemort possessing Sirius had been almost unimaginably difficult. Perhaps the next four would be easier, since he was older and knew what to expect now, but he was not counting on it. Merlin help us if

the other four Horcruxes start trying to grow bodies. “Do you know what they are? Where they are?”

“Death made me a bargain,” said Regulus, his face disgusted now. “Not a sale. She offered me the knowledge of what they were, or where they were, but not both.” He sighed. “I accepted the knowledge of where they were, Harry. I thought it would do little good if we knew their physical forms, but not where in the world Voldemort hid them. After all, if I’d only known that Slytherin’s locket existed, and not the nature of the traps that protected it, there’s no way I could have stolen it.”

Harry nodded encouragingly. There was an odd roaring sound in his ears. He had wondered what the secret to Voldemort’s immortality was, and how in Merlin’s name they would ever find out. Now it was almost within their reach. Even partial knowledge was better than none.

“She cheated even there, as much as she could,” said Regulus. “She gave me four images, but only two are likely to be useful. One was Hogwarts. The other was a desk in a room that looked old and Muggle and tired—probably somewhere in London, but even if I’d seen the outside of the building, I couldn’t have said for certain. Most Muggle places look alike to me. The third was a dark place, a burrow of some sort, I think, but so dark I couldn’t make out the details—“

“And the fourth was a dark house,” Harry finished, his skin prickling. Those are the images the bird showed me. That was what it was trying to tell me.

Regulus blinked at him. “Well, almost, Harry, yes. This was a shack, actually, surrounded by trees. It stood on a hill.” He shuddered. “It’s the most fragile or obvious hiding place, I think, but Voldemort’s protected it well. I could feel the curses just glimpsing it.”

And Harry knew, then, where one of the Horcruxes must be, and cursed himself for not seeing it before. “The shack,” he whispered, turning to Snape. “The little shack near the Riddle house, near Little Hangleton. Do you remember? We passed it on the way to the graveyard last Midwinter. It was so powerfully warded and cursed that

I didn't dare try to break the spells. Besides, I thought it was only a minor curiosity at the time."

Snape's face went blank, then stunned. Then it hardened, and he nodded. "Dark magic," he murmured. "Powerful Dark magic, to guard a place in such shambles. And now we know why."

"Why he put the spells up, at least. Not why he chose that place. Maybe if we can learn that, we can learn where the other hiding places are, more specifically." Harry turned to Regulus. "Death didn't give you a good sense of why Voldemort chose the hiding places he did, I suppose?"

Regulus shook his head. "As I said, she gave me as little information as she could. I'm glad that you recognized that house, at least, and I recognized Hogwarts. I don't know what we're going to do about the other two."

"I might have an idea," Harry muttered, mind racing. The bird could help. Perhaps. On the other hand, if it could really help, it would have told me about the Horcruxes and where they were outright. It obviously knows. But I'll talk to it when I can. "Thank you, Regulus. I—I can't say that I like the idea of your risking your life for this, even now." He met Regulus's eyes. "But it's enormously helpful. Thank you."

"She told me one thing more," Regulus said softly.

Harry immediately went alert. Regulus's hands were gripping the sides of his chair as if it were about to ride it into a storm. Harry swallowed twice before he could get the words out. "What?" he whispered. Draco leaned back against him and turned his head so that his face rested on Harry's neck, mouthing soothing words. Harry hardly noticed. His skin was clammy, and his breath quickened as he watched Regulus.

Regulus hesitated long moments, until Harry wanted to scream at him to hurry up. And then he spoke.

“Voldemort knew he couldn’t protect the Horcruxes from every form of physical destruction,” he whispered. “An imaginative enemy could always come up with something he hadn’t thought of. So, in addition to protection from common curses, he used a spell that’s part of the Unassailable Curses—not even the caster can undo it, or take it back, or break it by any other method than the one acceptable way of breaking it.” He fixed his eyes on Harry. “It might be as simple as a sneezing curse that can only be undone by Finite Incantatem, but then, you can only undo it by the Finite, not by blocking someone’s nose so they can’t sneeze; they’ll keep on sneezing regardless. And Voldemort cast a curse that said the Horcruxes could only ultimately be destroyed if someone died, as a willing sacrifice, either with the intention of destroying the Horcrux or for love of the person who intended to destroy the Horcrux.”

Harry stared at him, then shook his head. “That’s not—“

Sirius. Sylarana.

Harry stopped, the words sticking in his throat, the memories blazing in his mind. Sirius had cast the Killing Curse on himself, died a willing sacrifice for the love he bore Harry and the love he bore Connor, and to stop Voldemort from coming back into the world through him. His last four words before the Avada Kedavra had been to tell them farewell.

And he could see, he could see if he closed his eyes, Sylarana uncoiling from his arm and lunging upward at the basilisk, her scream ringing in his ears. Mine! My human! I defend him from other snakes!

And then the world trembled and rushed, and he was back in Acies’s Defense Against the Dark Arts class last year, with her words on willing sacrifice circling his head like birds of prey.

A life laid down, a limb cut off willingly, a privilege yielded without grumbling, forms the corner and the core of all sacrifices that most wizards trust. Without that corner and that core, sacrifice is usually seen as evil, or, at most, dubious magic. What can be done with blood and flesh and other things not given willingly? A great deal, but not as much as can be done with that yielded. The wizard’s will adds

its own sanction to the spell or the potion or the ritual performed with that willing sacrifice. The one the sacrifice is performed for grows more willing himself, more able, more powerful. Perhaps he will even be able to survive whatever storm comes after that yielding.

And he had even wondered if Sirius and Syllara's sacrifices had made a difference in his battles with Voldemort that followed.

They had. They had made all the difference.

Harry shook his head. He was aware that he had withdrawn from Draco, stumbling back against the far wall, and that he'd banged his ankle on something, probably the leg of the chair. He didn't mind. He didn't care. He couldn't think of anything but trying to deny what Regulus said.

"No," he whispered.

"Yes." There came a faint creaking sound—Regulus's hands tightening on the arms of the chair, probably. "I'm sorry, Harry. There's no way around it. Death is cruel, but Voldemort is crueler. To destroy the Horcruxes, four people who love you are going to have to die."

Harry could hear his breath coming out of his mouth in a moan. The worst part, the worst part, was that he had people around him who might be willing to do that, to give their lives up for him.

It's not—it's not right. The sacrifices were supposed to fall on me. Why shouldn't they? The battle with Voldemort is my fight. I'm not alone in it, but why should I have to have company in the sacrifices? Why should anyone be required to do this?

"Or die intending to destroy the Horcrux," Snape said sharply, somewhere beyond the roaring in his ears. "You said that, Regulus."

"I did," Regulus agreed. "But, either way, Harry will almost certainly need to be there. Voldemort sowed his doom the night that he made Harry his magical heir and passed the absorber ability to him. He can eat the magic of the Horcrux left after the sacrifice, and he can

either eat the piece of the soul or destroy it by destroying the magic and the anchor it depends on. Without magic and a physical anchor of some kind, the soul shard simply dissipates.”

Harry remembered the piece of Tom Riddle’s soul unraveling, shrinking, shrieking, and disappearing, after the destruction of the diary.

It was—

It was unfair. It was unjust. But he would do what he could to make sure it wasn’t.

“I can’t believe you’re talking as though this is actually the way we’ll fight the war,” he said, taking his arm away from his face and glaring at both Regulus and Snape. “It’s not. We’ll find some way around this. There has to be a way.”

“There is no other way,” Regulus said, his voice gentle. “I’m sorry, Harry, but this particular Unassailable Curse can only be broken by a willing sacrifice of the kind I described.”

“Maybe Death was lying to you,” Harry countered. “You said she was cruel.”

“That’s possible,” said Regulus. “But then she could have been lying about the locations of the Horcruxes, too, and you seem to believe that you have independent confirmation that’s not so. Besides, all the other information that my ancestors ever brought out of that painting was true.”

Draco was suddenly in front of Harry, gathering him up in his arms. Harry laid his head on his shoulder, but went on glaring at Regulus and Snape past Draco’s neck. “I’m not—I’m not going to have people dying just because they love me,” he said harshly. “No more sacrifices like that. We’ll find some way around this.”

“And if there is no way?” Regulus asked softly. “We know a way to destroy Voldemort, Harry. We know it works. Twice, it worked. I would be skeptical, too, if Sylarana or my brother was the only

occurrence, but we have it twice. The first time, Tom Riddle vanished after your snake died. The second time, the shard of Voldemort managed to leap into Rodolphus's body—probably because he was older and had more experience at possession than Tom Riddle—but when you destroyed that, he was gone. Do we dare ignore what that implies, Harry? Do we want Voldemort to ravage our world because we can't bear to think of giving up our lives?"

"I'll give up my life," Harry said stonily. He ignored Snape's thundercloud glare and the way Draco's arms clamped around him, almost hard enough to cut off his breath. "I'll give up my free time, and my learning of other spells that aren't Dark Arts or ways to destroy Horcruxes, and my schooling. But I'm not going to let other people die because they love me."

"Even if it's willing?" Regulus said. "Remember, Harry, it has to be willing for this to work. Utterly willing. An enemy couldn't put one of us under Imperio and demand that we kill ourselves to destroy the Horcrux. That doesn't work in other willing sacrifice situations; the magic doesn't accept it. So it would depend on our own free wills. And you wouldn't respect our choices? As vates?"

Harry became aware he was crying, but he couldn't move his hand up to wipe away the tears because Draco's arm was in the way. And Merlin, how he hated to cry, to show weakness in front of everyone. They were the ones who were talking about paying the cost, about dying.

"I'm not—I'm not worth this kind of devotion," he said. "Regulus, no one is. Can't you see that? I can't demand this of anyone."

"And demanding wouldn't work." Regulus's voice was like water wearing a hole in stone by long and patient dripping, like Joseph's. "It would always, always be choice, Harry."

No.

"I just—I want to work on some way to get around this." Harry shifted so that he could bury his face in Draco's shoulder, and wipe some of the tears off. "But I don't want to say that people have to kill

themselves for the sake of defeating Voldemort and that's the end of it."

It's not true. It can't be true. Please, let it not be true. Loving me leads people to their deaths already, when they go into battle. Please, let this not be true, too.

"We'll do research, Harry," Regulus said. "I would never suggest that we start committing suicide just because Death said so. And we have to find the Horcruxes and learn how to break the spells guarding them, too. But once we find them—"

Harry shook his head wildly, stubbornly, and Regulus fell silent with a little sigh. Harry stood there for a moment more, his heart beating hard, and then gently stepped back, extricating himself from Draco's arms.

"I think I'd like to be alone for a while," he said, and walked out of the room before anyone could protest.

SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS

Five hours later, Harry stood on the small tower on top of Silver-Mirror that some long-ago Black ancestor had built as an observatory, and stared at the stars, and felt his face twist in determination.

There has to be a way around it. That's all. There are probably going to be more than four deaths of people who loved me in battle. There are not going to be four suicides.

He had spent long enough on the tower, he thought, to persuade himself against the sly little voice that whispered in the back of his head, sounding far too much like Joseph.

You said that you would have to accept their suicides if they were willing. You said you would step out of the way if you believed that Draco did want to commit suicide and he wasn't under Imperius or otherwise compelled.

Harry slammed his hand down on the balcony around the tower. It cracked straight through with the magic in his palm, and nearly fell. Harry took in a deep breath, dragged the pieces back up, and cast Reparo.

That kind of suicide is different. For them, done because they want to do it. Or done the way Loki did it, to benefit and strengthen others.

I—I don't want people dying for me. I won't accept it. There has to be some way around this. Sylarana and Sirius were willing to die for me, but Sylarana didn't plan it. So there might be something there. We can look it up.

I am not worth someone else ending their life that way. A battle situation is different, equal risk to all, but this kind of decision? No. No. I won't.

Harry closed his eyes, then whirled away from the balcony and strode back into the house.

They were going to find a way around this, a way to circumvent Voldemort's horrible spell and not have people die for him.

I can make sacrifices. I'm used to them. But it's unfair, unjust, and wrong to ask someone else to make sacrifices because they love me. Draco deserves better. Snape and Connor deserve better. Regulus deserves better. All my allies deserve better.

I am not worth that.

Intermission: Repudiation

It was then.

It was then, while he knelt with his head lowered and his eyes focused on the floor in front of him—

His Lord had ordered him not to look up. And while Severus Snape was usually not in the habit of doing what his Lord told him to do, not in thought anyway, and had not been for a year, he knelt, and did not look, and listened.

It was then.

It was then, while he heard flesh tearing, scoring itself open while the Rat's Claw Curse ran up and down Regulus's body like a river of flowing blood in and of itself—

The Rat's Claw Curse was one that the Dark Lord rarely used. It mimicked the effects of feeding rats on the victim's body, neither killing nor draining him of blood, and it lasted longer than many other pain curses. When the victim heard the incantation, he knew he was in for hours of torture. The Crucio could snap fragile minds in under three minutes if continuously applied, and most other pain curses could last only ten minutes at the outside, but the Rat's Claw endured, and endured, and endured.

It was then.

It was then, while he knew that Voldemort was punishing Regulus for a crime Snape did not know and did not understand—

He did not understand how Regulus could have kept a secret like this, of all people. Regulus was not a particularly good liar. He avoided confrontations and played on his blood when he had need, and he killed hesitantly, but since he also didn't try to gain much power or precedence in the Death Eaters, most of the others rarely worried about him. He was not fun to torture, and their Lord would not thank them if they accidentally killed him in their play and thus deprived the House of Black of an heir and the Dark Lord of access to rare Black

artifacts. Regulus sought out Snape too much, and he talked too much. That he had managed to keep from coming to Snape and talking about this was not to be believed.

It was then.

It was then, while Regulus arched his back and bellowed and shrieked and screamed, and Snape knew that the only person he had really thought of as his since he had joined the Death Eaters was suffering, was suffering, would suffer and not live—

It was then that his heart truly left Voldemort and embraced something like personal loyalty to Dumbledore.

It was not kindness. It was not compassion for the Mudblood and Muggle victims of the Death Eaters. It was not a reformation of his conscience, a gazing back on the past and a recoiling from his part in it. It was not a pure and shining epiphany during which the Light visited him and made him stop being a Dark wizard. He knew some members of the Order of the Phoenix would think so. He knew Albus would want to think so, and Snape would allow him to use Legilimency and find an answer something to that effect. It was nothing grand, or noble, or philosophical.

It was pure fleshly revulsion that the one note of grace he had found among the Death Eaters was being ripped and torn out of its shell.

It was then, and for that reason alone, that Severus Snape stopped being a Death Eater. Dumbledore would destroy the man who had destroyed Regulus. Snape would run in his train. He would weave all the pretty justifications that were needed later, and make himself believe them.

Against the enemy he could not bring down alone, he would fling a powerful wizard's vengeance, even as he had thought to do to the Marauders when he first joined Voldemort.

He did not jerk when Regulus screamed with pain, because he did not allow himself to do.

It was then.

Intermission: Rebirth

The graveyard breathed around him, and it was true, it was real, what he had denied for so long was alive around him again, and the thirteen years he had gone without feeling this had been the time he was dead, not the years when he walked in the company of it.

His Lord's power was everywhere, roaring, restored to a body now, leaping and pouring like black water over the headstones, shaking its head in the mad gladness of a chained beast with its bonds snapped at last. Snape tossed back his head and let it bathe him. He laughed, or found that he was laughing, and did not know how long he had been doing that.

He walked with quick but unhurried steps towards the center of the graveyard. His Lord held court there, still mighty though he was without his throne and his snake. The other Death Eaters drew back slightly when they saw Snape coming.

"Severus." Voldemort's voice hissed the sibilants more than Snape remembered from the last time he had seen him alive. "My faithful servant."

Snape dropped into a kneel, which hurt his knee. He was no longer as young as he had once been. But it did not matter. What mattered was the painful awakening of life inside him again. Merlin, how had he lived without this, this circle of darkness that pulsed around him and sang wildly in his brain and found its echo in the darkness within his own soul and the darkness on his arm?

"Have you held true to me, Severus?" the Dark Lord asked. "Have you served me even when the fool Dumbledore thought you were true to him?"

He already knew the answer. The wiser ones among the Death Eaters gathered here would already know the answer. But Voldemort wanted it said aloud. For the sake of the less wise, Snape knew, and for the sake of sealing their bargain anew with the words.

He lifted his head and caught his Lord's gleaming scarlet eyes. Once, he nodded. "I have, my Lord," he whispered. "Dumbledore holds me close to his heart, and gives me custody of his precious children, and denies me nothing. But I have always been yours." He dipped his head to kiss Voldemort's robes.

And he knew the Dark Lord's joy, fierce and feral, echoed his own. Even Voldemort could grow tired of those who cringed and whined and did nothing else, or those, like Bellatrix and Evan, too mad to know the difference between respect and fear. Snape's willing surrender was something he craved, because Snape had made the choice to bow before strength, and, in this case, to return to his Lord's side.

"Then rise to your feet, my faithful servant."

And he did, and he let his mouth part in an expression half-sneer, half-laugh, to see how the others drew back from him. He saved the best glimpse for the last, as his eyes traveled the half-ring of Death Eaters and fell on the face of the boy tied to the red-black rock, staring at him with utmost betrayal.

"Professor," he breathed.

Voldemort rested one hand on Snape's shoulder. "Oh, dear, Harry," he said, with a mocking tone in his voice that Snape would ordinarily have found too heavy, but was, now, just right. "Did you think Severus was on your side? Did you believe that he was a wizard of the Light? Your adopted father, perhaps?" He laughed, and the other Death Eaters joined in, though Snape doubted they truly understood the joke. "As if Severus Snape could ever be an adopted father to James Potter's son!"

Harry's face crumbled with something more than betrayal, then, and Snape rejoiced. He could see his enemy's face doing the same thing. Harry looked so much like James, especially when he shut his eyes, which weren't the same color, and cried. Snape had won one victory over his enemies, and those long days of tipping between hatred and something like a wavering affection for Harry were settled now,

decisively, in favor of his loathing for the Marauders. His Dark Mark rang like a beaten gong with Voldemort's pleasure and his own.

"Stop!"

The voice was shrill with fear, and high with hatred, and it was one that Severus knew all too well. He pivoted smoothly, lifting his wand. Remus Lupin had Apparated in to stand in front of the outer ring of Death Eaters, his own wand clutched in a shaking hand and his face pale.

Looking at him, Snape could not imagine why he had ever feared the werewolf. Tonight was not a full moon night, and Lupin could not transform. His hair was gray and shaggy, though he was the same age as Snape. His shoulders were hunched. His eyes were tired, bearing the strain of transforming again and again for month after month. He had never been more than a passable wizard, with much book learning but without much magical strength.

"I've come to rescue Harry," Lupin said, leveling his wand.

"You've come to die," Snape corrected softly, and then glanced at his master. He would nearly die if he could not play with Lupin, but it was true that Voldemort had first choice about assigning prisoners to their torturers. If he gave Lupin to Bellatrix or Evan, then Snape could do nothing but stand back and only join in as his Lord told him he could.

Voldemort's smile was horrible, and exactly what he had hoped to see. His Lord had not forgotten what he had seen in Snape's mind the first time they met, then, and the hatred that had driven Snape to his side.

"He is yours, my servant," he said.

Snape lifted his wand, and struck Lupin's away with a simple Expelliarmus. He heard Harry scream, but that was a small thing, sour even, beside the chance to wreak vengeance on the body of the man who had nearly killed him when he was in his sixth year at Hogwarts.

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Sacrifice, Power, and Joy

I will not give up.

After days of study, days of searching, Harry could say that only one book in the Hogwarts library contained the word “Horcruxes,” and that alluded to them only as “Dark magic of which we are forbidden to speak.” There were powerful destructive curses in some of those books—Snape had given him permission to use the Restricted Section—but none that would reverse an Unassailable Curse, and none that could stand in for a willing sacrifice.

Of course, Harry had known that. He tried to tell himself that he had known that. A willing sacrifice was the most powerful of magic, always. Nothing else could have changed the centaurs’ nature from rapists to gentler creatures and allowed him to free them from their web. Nothing else could have enabled Charles Rosier-Henlin to so thoroughly destroy Karkaroff, as he had with the Pyra spell; it was sure to kill precisely because it required the suicide-sacrifice of a wizard. Nothing else could have destroyed a Horcrux.

No.

He would keep searching.

A hand slammed down on the book in front of him. Harry blinked at it for a long, stupid moment before he realized it was blocking the words he had tried to read, and that probably meant the interrupter wanted something of him. He sat back, blinking again, and looked up. Draco’s eyes met his, shining with such intensity that Harry blinked a third time.

“What is it, Draco?” he asked. His voice was thready, but that came from hours of not using it. It had been a week since they returned to school, and Harry had not shouted himself hoarse with fury and frustration since the first day.

“I want you to tell me what you’re doing,” said Draco, his voice low and pleasant enough, but Harry could hear an edge within it. He frowned.

“You know what I’m doing,” he said, even as he cast a privacy ward around them. They were hardly about to release word of the Horcruxes to the whole school. “Researching a way to get around the willing sacrifices. Or break an Unassailable Curse without using a sacrifice.”

Draco just watched him. Harry found it hard to meet his eyes, and didn’t know why. He knew he was doing the right thing. As Regulus had said, even if four people decided to sacrifice themselves for the sake of destroying the Horcruxes and had no loving connection to Harry, Harry would still need to be there and drain the magic that the soul shard clung to. If he could find one thing to make the task easier, one thing that would ease the agony of those deaths or make them not have to happen at all, then it was his duty to do so. He was twined in this, by the scar on his forehead, and the prophecy that overlapped him and Draco and his brother and Merlin knew who else, and the fact that Voldemort hadn’t simply succeeded in killing him the first time.

“And I don’t suppose you know anything about the monitoring board,” Draco said, still in that reasonable voice.

“Of course I do,” said Harry. He pitched his voice into the earnest tone of a second-year Hufflepuff answering questions in Transfiguration. “It’s headed by Griselda Marchbanks, and it has equal numbers of Light and Dark wizards on it, and—”

“You don’t know that they sent an owl wanting you to meet with them this weekend?” Draco cut in.

Harry shut his mouth and looked away.

“I thought so,” said Draco. “You haven’t been paying attention to anything outside the library in the past week, Harry. There’s the owl from the monitoring board. There’s a note from Ignifer Apollonis that I can’t open, because it burns me every time I try. She charmed it so that only you could read it. That came Thursday, and I assume it’s information she doesn’t want to convey by the phoenix song spell. It might be urgent. And there’s the fact that half of Slytherin wants to

ask you to play Seeker for them in the Ravenclaw game, despite the fact that Sam's actually on the team." He paused for a moment, then added, "And there's the fact that you're slipping so badly in your classes that all the teachers have noticed, not just Belluspersonna and Snape and Pettigrew."

"You could use her name," Harry muttered. "We're behind a privacy ward."

"I prefer not to slip." Draco's voice sharpened. "While you're locking yourself away from the world, Harry, life is going on without you. And it needs you. Idiot. Or do you really think that finding a way around those sacrifices will mean that you're no longer vates or a student at Hogwarts or a Slytherin or my partner anymore?"

"This is more important!" Harry hissed. "It has to be. You heard what Regulus said. I've got to be involved in—"

The look on Draco's face stopped him. Last year, it might have been hurt. Now, it was just black fury.

"More important," he said. "So I'm less important than the Horcruxes, am I?"

"Draco, you know what I meant—"

"No, actually, I don't know what you mean." Draco drew his wand, not taking his eyes from Harry. "We're supposed to be past this, Harry. Before, I could threaten to use binding spells and sleeping spells on you, and you'd sigh and let yourself be coaxed back into a semblance of a normal life. And then you reached the point where you didn't need that, where you were actually thinking of and looking out for yourself, and I relaxed. And then I passed through my Declaration. That means that I won't just threaten you now. I will use those binding curses and sleeping spells on you."

"Draco—"

Draco whispered Consopio, and Harry had to place a Protego before it to fend it off. "Stop this, Draco," he said, anger and fear and worry sharpening his voice to a diamond edge. "Stop."

He shook his head, white-blond hair tossing in several different directions. He didn't look exhausted, or upset, Harry thought. He looked bloody furious. "Do you want me to stop? Fight me, Harry."

"You're delusional—"

"You are, you wanker, for denying me what I want from you, for not fulfilling your promises, for acting like a bloody child when you know better!" Harry was glad that he'd thought to add a silencing spell to the privacy ward; Draco's yells would have brought Madam Pince running, otherwise. "If you were still suffering from your training and the idea that you had to do everything, I could excuse this. But you're not. And it's time that you learned better, Harry, and stopped falling back on that for everything. You've changed. You've grown up. So act like an adult, not a child! And if I need to treat you like a child who needs a nap, then I will." He aimed another sleeping curse, this time nonverbal, but Moody had taught Harry to recognize the wand movement for that one, and Harry deflected it, too.

He could feel irritation bubbling up in him, lava beneath broken pieces of ice. He was angry that Draco had interrupted his research, and he was worried that someone might come around the corner and see, if not hear them, squabbling like madmen, and he was—

He was conscious that Draco was right.

"Shit," he whispered.

He wasn't sure if it was the word or the softness of the word that made Draco lower his wand and eye him critically. Harry waved a hand vaguely to signal the duel was done, and sat down on the chair. Draco tensed, but Harry stared past him, and didn't return to the book. Draco seemed to consider that a reason to lower his guard and take another chair, though his wand remained steady.

"I can't bear it if someone else dies for me," Harry told the air. "Sylarana didn't know she would die, just that she was willing to. Sirius did it for both me and Connor, and to keep the world safe from Voldemort. That was how I lived with their sacrifices. But this—if Regulus is right, I'll either have to live with the knowledge that someone is dying because he loves me or ask perfect strangers to give up their lives based on the intention to destroy the Horcruxes."

"And save the world from Voldemort," Draco said, in his own most snide and irritating tone. "You always forget that bit, Harry."

"Shut it, will you?" Harry asked, but without heat, which he thought was the only reason Draco actually did it.

Harry sighed. "If this was three years ago, then I'd be able to get through these sacrifices by promising myself suicide at the end, to atone for them." He ignored Draco's leaning forward so fast that his elbow connected with the table, and the subsequent curses. "But that was before I swore to the vates path, and entered the joining ritual with you, and built the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, and decided that I'll actually have a future." He reached across the table, and Draco's hand was there, waiting for his. Harry squeezed it. "All those things have to continue. They matter to more people than just me."

"That's always your test, isn't it?"

"Always." Harry ignored the bitterness in Draco's voice. That was part of him, and it was not going to change. Harry rather liked that part of himself. "And it would be more selfish to neglect those concerns while I'm researching the sacrifices, or because of the sacrifices, when they're waiting."

"Or right beside you and willing to tell you when you're being an idiot."

"That, too." Harry stood up, with a sigh, and glanced at the books. Once, he had had a thick bubble that he could use to ignore reality, built by his training and his love of Connor and his conviction that if someone did try to tell him to live differently, it was merely because they did not understand the necessity of Harry's role. Now, the shells he could build were thin, and liable to rupture the moment reality

introduced itself to him. Creeping in like a whipped dog was the knowledge that he had been ignoring: that he couldn't stop living because of this.

"Someday, you'll know this from the beginning, without having to reason yourself into it," Draco muttered, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and steering him from the library. "And without making me miss dinner."

"You can go to the kitchens, and I'm sure the owl sent from Hogsmeade will be waiting for me," Harry said, with a shrug.

Draco gave him a long, measuring glance. Harry frowned. It's a long time since he did that, like he doesn't understand me. Usually, he understands me too well. "What?"

"It doesn't bother you that I eat food the house elves provide, even though you don't," Draco said slowly.

Harry shook his head. "I wouldn't expect you to change that, Draco. You don't see anything morally wrong with it, so you're not being a hypocrite, and you grew up with it, so it's not as though it's a sudden habit you adopted at Hogwarts because it's convenient. What I can do is provide reasoned arguments if you ever want to listen, and hope to show you that life can be lived perfectly well without house elf labor. We have magic. We can do basic cleaning and cooking charms without much loss of our time. I don't think there's such a large difference between life with house elves as slaves and life with house elves free—except for the house elves, it means a great deal more than it ever will to us."

"It's a status symbol," said Draco. "A privilege. The Weasleys don't have any house elves. The Malfoys do. It makes a difference."

"Yes, but I think the difference is stupid," Harry pointed out.

"And yet you won't force me to change."

Draco's voice was wary, now, and Harry wondered how in the world he had gone from scolding Harry about sacrifice to sounding as if he

feared to lose an argument about house elves. Harry could not understand why he would be afraid of losing an argument. All he had to do was not listen to Harry, if he really wanted to keep the same opinion, and if he changed his mind because the arguments were good enough to convince him, then surely that only proved his desire not to change his mind had been wrought out of stubbornness in the first place, and not reason?

"Of course not," said Harry, and kissed the side of his cheek. "Vates, remember? I'm not forcing you to change, Draco."

"You would like it if I did."

"Yes."

"And you could."

"Could what? Could force you to change?" Harry stopped walking and turned around, gripping Draco's shoulder. It was Draco's turn to avoid his gaze. Harry shook him slightly. "Draco, I won't use compulsion. And you know that. And what else in the world could force you to change?"

"Threats," said Draco, sounding sulky. "Promises. Growing more distant and colder to me until I do."

Harry shook his head. "That's not what I do, Draco."

"But you know that I will?" Draco cocked his head, and his eyes had returned to that earlier intensity. "They're tools in a Dark wizard's arsenal, Harry, and I will use them sometimes. If not with you, with others. And with you, too, if they're the only way I can get you to stop being an idiot, or come to your senses, or not do something stupid."

"I know that," Harry said, beginning to feel faintly exasperated. "Suffice it to say, Draco, that you weren't the first Dark wizard I ever met."

"And you're fine with it," Draco clarified. "And you won't force me to change the way I act."

“No.”

“Why did you ignore me when I half-choked Michael, then?”

Harry shoved his shoulder. “Now you’re being deliberately obtuse. You know there’s a difference between consequences for an action and forcing you to change your behavior. That’s what’s going to happen if you play around with someone else’s emotions deliberately, or for the same reason you did with Michael’s, except that next time it would be a week, and after that a month. That doesn’t mean I’ll enter your mind and try to alter your beliefs, Draco, or chase you down and prattle at you about house elves until you convert. When you jump off a step, you know gravity’s going to pull you down, don’t you? It’s not the stair’s fault if you fall and cut your knee. You chose to do it. But the stair won’t force you to jump down, and neither will I.”

“You’re human, Harry,” Draco said, so quietly Harry could hardly hear him. “You can’t expect your decisions and your punishments to have the force of natural law.”

“I’m going to try to come as close as I can to that.” Harry stared into his eyes. “I love you, Draco. I’m in love with you—and that’s the only person I can say that about, even as I love others. I don’t like punishing you. But neither am I going to say that your actions have no consequences just because you’re my partner and my lover.” He managed to say that without blushing. Harry was proud of himself.

Draco studied him with troubled eyes, then tugged on Harry’s arm. “Come on,” he said with forced lightness. “Let’s find your owl.”

Harry let Draco pull him along, much as he let him change the subject. He knew Draco still didn’t really understand. He wondered if he ever would, until or unless he changed his mind on house elves and like subjects.

Perhaps it was like Draco not understanding about the sacrifices. He would claim that if someone wanted to kill himself to destroy a Horcrux, why should Harry worry? It was the individual’s free choice.

He didn't believe, as Harry did, that death ended all opportunities for change. He didn't see, as Harry did, the world full of glorious souls packed with glorious possibility, and that the moment a person died, that stripped away the possibilities for them. Harry didn't want people sacrificing their lives for him because he believed he was not worth it, but, also, he did not want to be the reason that lives full of grander chances ended. Who knew what better things those sacrifices might have done, had they been allowed to live?

Thus why he had wanted his parents to live. Thus why he hadn't killed Dumbledore until driven to do it in the last extreme. Thus why he hadn't wanted to turn his back on his brother, Draco, and Parvati even during those few weeks in September when they were driving him mad. He could see himself as a champion of free will and a champion of life. He did not want to be a champion of death.

Which, really, should be selfish and Slytherin enough on Harry's part to content Draco. Harry wondered if he would ever manage to express it to him in words that would.

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Draco should be looking at his book, he knew. They had a Transfiguration exam tomorrow, Professor Bulstrode making sure they hadn't forgotten their lessons over the holidays, and, as Peter had warned him, Transfiguring other humans was distant enough from becoming an Animagus that Draco's growing expertise in one wouldn't help him in the other. He had to pay attention.

Instead, he found his gaze continually straying to Harry, who lay curled with his head on the pillow and one arm around his face, in a defensive posture he usually adopted when he didn't want someone to see his emotions or his tears. It worried Draco that Harry was sleeping that way.

But he had been sane. He had done what he had to do. He'd eaten a late dinner, and answered the monitoring board's request for a meeting with a letter that simply said he would come but bring both Snape and Draco with him, and opened Ignifer's note—it said something about information from her father, Draco gathered, and

Harry had immediately contacted her and told her that it wasn't worth bargaining with Cupressus yet, given what he would demand in return—and he'd talked to the rest of Slytherin House about playing Seeker. Draco had been present for the conversation, and he would have said in the beginning that the other Slytherins would win. Yet Harry had spoken reasonable words about practices and fairness to other players and the harmony of the team, and in the end he'd walked out of the common room with Sam still secured as Seeker.

Draco could not understand it—not how Harry had won without hexing people, not why he had wanted to refuse the position of Seeker in the first place when the rest of the Quidditch team was falling over themselves to offer it to him, not why Harry wouldn't simply use some of his power to get what he wanted.

So, yes, compulsion was right out, but there were threats, intimidation, and the resource Draco thought Harry most underestimated: the sheer, shimmering power of his magic, which, unbound as Harry carried it lately, made other people practically twitch to be near it. That was entirely natural, the wizardly longing for magic. Harry might not have a Declaration, and he might be making no efforts to recruit more sworn companions as Voldemort had recruited his Death Eaters, but he still had the power of a Lord or a Lady, and at base that was what drew other wizards or witches to him. To stand in the presence of such a pure example of what they coveted was enough for some people. It would make others listen. And still others would at least assign themselves as neutral parties in relation to Harry, because Lords were too rare to destroy. One had to put down a mad dog like Voldemort. Otherwise, they were to be spared if at all possible.

And Draco had seen Harry use all of those in the past.

Only when he absolutely thought he had to. Only when he believed something more precious would be lost if he hesitated than if he acted.

Power under restraint was such an alien thing to Draco. He supposed that was the Lucius in him. Narcissa moved more gracefully and elegantly, that was true, but she moved, and used the clever words

and political connections that were her particular weapons as she saw fit.

Harry could do so much more than any of them, and yet he preferred to do so much less.

Draco put his Transfiguration text down, not even pretending to pay attention now, and folded his hands behind his head to consider Harry. Harry was content to let him have his path, the path of the Dark that was already changing Draco in ways he could notice and, doubtless, in ways that he didn't notice. Certain spells were easier now, others more difficult. He could feel a vague hostility towards any Light wizard, though that died as the days progressed and the wheel of the year since the ritual turned. He found himself more confident, more prone to expressing his opinions. That might have been magic, but it might as easily have been his renewed sense of a place in the wizarding world. He had a solid foundation on which to stand. He was part of a tradition that stretched back generations, and didn't only include Malfoys. He was an adult, in ways that even turning seventeen wouldn't make him.

Harry neither tried to sway him from that road, nor felt inclined to follow it. It was as if he were merely moving in company with Draco, down a parallel but unconnected path.

Yet most people Draco knew argued for their beliefs. Couples ended their love affairs over them. Potter still hadn't approached the Patil bitch again, or at least not on any permanent basis. The state of things between Granger and Smith had settled into something like all-out war. Even Terry Boot's girlfriend, a seventh-year Ravenclaw Draco didn't know, was capable of extended bouts of nasty silence, after which Boot usually apologized.

He and Harry should clash so strongly—Dark-raised and Dark-Declared versus Light-raised and undeclared, pureblood versus halfblood, traditionalist versus revolutionary, ordinary wizard versus Lord-level—that they would be continually driven apart, unless one of them changed his views to support the other. And yet they didn't.

Draco would have felt easier if he could have understood why.

Perhaps it's a result of some things that don't change, he decided slowly, as he picked up his Transfiguration text again. Professor Bulstrode would not understand a preoccupation with his lover, no matter who said lover was. We change, we change all the time, but there are basics that don't. It's the Dark for me, and Harry's love for self-sacrifice, for him.

Perhaps he should trust to its working, Draco thought, and think less about how it did.

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“He is worse than we thought, then.”

Harry simply nodded, not really trusting himself to speak. After some hesitation, he'd decided to tell Jing-Xi about the Horcruxes. If he failed, and Voldemort moved to take over more of the world than Britain, the other Lords and Ladies would need to know the secret of his immortality.

Jing-Xi leaned back in the chair she usually used when they met. Her power crept throughout the room, Harry had found, and wrought subtle transformations, or Transfigurations. The chair grew larger, and with sunbursts along the arms and on the back, or with dark patterns that mimicked the patterns of her waving hair. The stone above the hearth turned rose-colored. A subtle scent of flowers, not ones Harry was familiar with, wafted through the air. Harry assumed they were natural attendants on Jing-Xi, or perhaps on any Light Lady. It wasn't as though he'd ever met one before, to know. Or perhaps she'd made a special study of Transfiguration, or magic of the senses. That might fit with her interests as a research witch.

Before Harry had finished studying the new shape the hearth was sculpting itself into, Jing-Xi leaned forward and captured his attention again. “I will tell the others about Voldemort when I speak to them,” she said. “I will meet Pamela Seaborn, the Light Lady of America, in a week’s time. For now, Harry, there is another part of your etiquette training that you have not yet mastered, and should before you make contact with anyone Lord-level other than me.”

“Which part?” Harry sat up nervously. So far, his etiquette training with Jing-Xi had consisted mostly of history, which she’d told him enough of to make his head spin. There was the Pact, which made Lord-level wizards and witches not interfere with each other’s magical communities. There were procedures for dealing with wizards and witches like Jing-Xi, whose power grew for decades, and procedures for dealing with wizards and witches whose power had mostly come on them by the end of their second decade, who were more common; Jing-Xi said Tom Riddle had been one of those. There were permissions to be asked before one visited another country that had a Lord or Lady in it, and the reasons those permissions had come about. There was the dizzying dance done to keep those of the Light and those of the Dark away from each other’s throats. And there were more names of historical, dead Lords and Ladies than Harry knew if he could remember. But Jing-Xi had spoken relatively little about what Harry should do when he met someone else of his power level in person yet, because, as she had said, she was the only one he would have occasion to meet and not battle for now.

Jing-Xi gestured at the hearth, and then at her chair, which this time was sea-green with the waving patterns done like seaweed, as Harry had thought of the first time he saw her hair. “The signs,” she said. “These are the small, involuntary manifestations of one’s magic. They tell a visitor what to expect, and they reassure him or her of honesty. Of course, most wizards and witches of lesser power are surprised or afraid when they see what I do without trying—” she tapped the chair “—so for the most part we keep our magic behind light barriers. In the presence of another Lord or Lady, those barriers constitute a lie. We let them fall. The signs that emerge tell those we meet something about us, our moods and states of mind and health.” She leaned forward and fixed her eyes on Harry. “Each time, I have warded this room so that our magic does not spill outside it. Since I am stronger than you are, you could not destroy Hogwarts by letting go of your power while I am here. Yet that does not happen. You have kept the barriers up. I have no idea what your signs are.”

“I told you about the bird,” said Harry, feeling a touch defensive. “No one else can see it, not just you, and I don’t know how to make it become visible.”

Jing-Xi shook her head calmly. "That bird happened only because of the twists that the connection between you and Voldemort has taken since his resurrection. Thomas told me the whole fascinating theory of it. Your signs, Harry, are yours. They occur in relation to no other wizard. I want to see them."

"So would I," Harry muttered.

Silence. Then Jing-Xi said, with exactly the tone of voice Thomas used when he encountered something completely new, "You don't know what they are?"

Harry shook his head.

He could not have borne pity, but Jing-Xi did not exhibit any. She regarded him with steady dark eyes, then nodded. "I suppose that should not be surprising, since your situation is unusual," she said. "Drop your barriers, Harry, and we will see them for the first time together. It is an honor. Usually, Lords and Ladies come into their signs so young that they know them thoroughly by the time they meet another of our power."

Harry swallowed. "I've never dropped my barriers completely before, except during—" Well, he wasn't about to tell her the details. That was something shared and private, between him and Draco.

"You cannot hurt the school," Jing-Xi whispered. "Nor me. If there is anyone in your life you can relax with, Harry, it should be a Lady or a Lord. Now."

Harry worked to still his rapid, panicked breathing, and closed his eyes. He tried, as hard and sincerely as he could, to imagine all his barriers falling, and the magic coming out.

He heard a deep purr as the magic expanded around him. Then Jing-Xi said, "Open your eyes, Harry."

Harry did, and was startled to find that the room had become bright and deep, the walls splashed with jeweled colors: green, blue, purple,

like a jungle dreaming at night. Now and then he thought he saw a tree, but the colors were too abstract to make a true painting. The shadows of animals stalked through the jungle. When Harry focused on them, he saw a snake, golden of scale and green of eye like Sylarana, and a lynx, and a huge black cat with eyes as green as his own, which turned and hissed at him.

“Ah,” Jing-Xi breathed. “That is what your magic does when left to its own devices, Harry.”

“Make a jungle?” Harry tore his gaze away from the circling shadows to face her again.

“Create,” Jing-Xi said, severe and serene. She was watching the colors and the animals with an expression of honest wonder, honest pleasure, which made Harry fight to keep from hiding all the magic again at once. A sliding sensation, like raindrops, trickled along his skin. He wasn’t sure if it came from his connection to the magic thrumming all around them, or from her magic interacting with his, or from the fact that someone else was looking and seeing. “The colors will reflect your dominant moods, I believe. The snake is important to you in capacities you have already explained. The lynx?” One of her tendrils of dark hair waved to point at Harry.

“I think it’ll be my Animagus form.”

Jing-Xi nodded, and held out her hand. One of the dark cats paused in spitting at Harry and trotted to her, delicately extending its nose to sniff her fingers. A bright white spark of lightning leaped between them when it did so. The cat hissed and leaped away with claws that flickered silver, then melted into the colors with the other shadows. Harry realized he was raising his barriers in shock.

“No,” Jing-Xi whispered. “Do not send them away, not yet.”

Reluctantly, Harry forced them down again, and the signs reappeared. Two dark cats followed a golden snake along the far wall, while a lynx played beneath them. A third dark cat coiled in a half-tree and watched Jing-Xi with wariness Harry had sometimes felt on his own

features when someone was trying to get him to do something he didn't like.

"I don't know what those cats are," he felt compelled to say.

Jing-Xi smiled and glanced at him. "And I did not know why I changed furniture as I do until I was forty-three," she said. "Do not worry, Harry. You will figure it out in time." She sat back and looked at the walls in contentment.

"Should we—"

"Hush," Jing-Xi whispered. "Your magic is free for the first time in your life, Harry. Enjoy it."

Harry sat back in his chair and tried. He found it easier to phrase it in his head as words, though; the odd joy and the thrumming traveling his nerves was too new. This is what I can really do. And it doesn't hurt anyone. All it wants is to exist by and for itself, to be used and enjoyed. It doesn't need to answer to anyone else's call to be worth something.

His breathing eased, and gold flooded the blue and green and purple like the sun rising in a distant sky.

"Beautiful, Harry," Jing-Xi said.

And, for the first time, Harry could feel that it really was.

Chapter Fifty-Eight: Missions Accomplished

"If they continue like this, the Quidditch Cup is ours," Katie declared, spooning some potatoes onto her plate.

Connor chewed his own, but made sure to swallow before he spoke. Lately, Hermione, probably because Zacharias had played a prank on her involving it, had been casting impossibly complex hexes on anyone who talked with his mouth full. Ron had already had his mouth moved to the back of his head twice. "I don't know about that, Katie. Yes, Sam is hopeless, but the rest of the Slytherin team really isn't bad. They're just too used to depending on the Seeker, and they haven't adjusted their strategy to focus on the Chasers and the Beaters yet."

"You can't mean that, mate!" Ron exclaimed, leaning over Connor and reaching for the pork chops. "Your brother was the only player on the team worth anything."

Connor shook his head. "Like I said—"

"Then tell me how you expect Hellebore to do anything but hit the Bludger in some direction our Chasers aren't," Ron interrupted pointedly.

"Well, all right, perhaps focusing their strategy on the Beaters wouldn't help, either," Connor admitted.

Ron tore into his meat with a triumphant expression, started to say something, then caught Hermione's eye and looked down at his plate meekly.

Connor stirred his potatoes and looked around the Great Hall. He wasn't really hungry, since he'd grabbed a late lunch due to Quidditch practice, and then a nosh from the kitchens to fortify himself for studying later. Besides, lately it seemed as if he couldn't stop seeing things.

He wasn't sure if it was Harry who had taught him to see that way, or Parvati. Harry had certainly made it necessary in the first place. The

brother of the Boy-Who-Lived couldn't be blind, and there were certain things Harry couldn't see, even as Connor hadn't seen certain things when it had been his turn to carry the title. But Parvati was the one who had taught him to tell at a glance who fancied someone else, and whether a couple was having an argument. Connor hadn't wanted to apply those lessons to Harry and Draco, but since Harry wasn't going to abandon Malfoy, he'd started to.

He wondered when Ron was going to notice that Lavender had a crush on him, or when Ginny would notice that Dean had a crush on her. Merlin knew why Lavender hadn't approached Ron, since Parvati was the only girl Connor felt comfortable talking to about things like that. But he'd confronted Dean, and Dean had gone all red in the face and muttered something about "respecting Ginny's grief over Zabini."

Connor had pointed out that Zabini had been a bloody traitor, and that anyway it had been almost seven months since the siege of Hogwarts and Blaise's well-deserved expulsion, so why not go and at least ask Ginny for a date? But then Dean started talking about finer feelings, and Connor found reason to be elsewhere.

His gaze went straying down the table, past Ron and Katie's argument over Quidditch and Hermione's intent writing of a letter—probably another one to the Daily Prophet, to tell them something new she'd discovered or thought of about the Grand Unified Theory—and locked on Parvati. She wasn't eating much, either, but that wasn't unusual. The way she toyed with her fork instead of sipping at her pumpkin juice or looking politely around the Great Hall was new, though.

I miss her.

Connor scowled at his plate. He kept missing Parvati, but he wasn't sure if going up and talking to her would mean that he was apologizing for being wrong. He didn't want to say he'd been wrong, because he hadn't. Parvati had seen that all her fears were groundless, that Harry had returned to Hogwarts with enough power to level the school but no intention of leveling it. She should be the one to apologize.

Does it matter who is, so long as I break this silence?

Connor chewed the inside of his cheek as he thought about that. He hadn't thought of it before; he'd just assumed that talking to Parvati would have to include an apology, whether or not he meant it. But if he just went up and talked to him? The worst she could do was ignore him and walk on. And she'd done that for months now anyway.

He made his decision, and stood up, making his way down the table. Parvati looked up quickly at the sound of the bench scraping back, then turned and stared at her food.

He stopped behind her chair. He could see the back of her neck growing red, and wondered if she was willing him not to talk to her.

"Parvati?"

Her hand tightened on her fork enough that Connor was surprised it didn't go flying out and clatter against the wall. And now everyone at the Gryffindor table was watching them, including McLaggen. Connor wanted to get somewhere away from his grin, before he went with instinct and punched him. McLaggen was a nasty piece of work. He'd been the one to suggest that they turn Harry over to Voldemort last year, and Connor and Ron had had to sit on him and explain some things very firmly before he saw the light.

He looked back at Parvati, and reminded himself that he wasn't angry right now, that he couldn't afford to be. Parvati had turned and was looking at him, really looking at him, for the first time since November.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I want to talk to you," said Connor. Her eyes widened, and he had to control his reaction; she was so pretty when she did that. Her eyes were so big and dark. "In the abandoned classroom on the Charms corridor."

"Why?" she whispered.

Connor wouldn't let her hide behind ignorance. If he took a risk by talking to her, then she was going to take the same risk. He folded his arms and frowned at her. "You know why."

Parvati looked down and spent a minute shredding her napkin. McLaggen, the obnoxious piece of shit, went on grinning. Connor could feel his own neck flushing, but he didn't move. He was Harry's brother, and that meant stubborn. And he was a Gryffindor, and that meant brave.

“All right,” Parvati whispered.

Connor started, then remembered where he was, and nodded. “Good,” he said, and marched away from the Great Hall, heading for the Charms corridor. He wouldn’t let himself think about whether this was a good idea or not. He’d suffered in enough silence and in enough impatience. It was time to talk to Parvati and resolve this once and for all, rather than leaving it in this endless drifting space where neither of them knew what would happen next. He wanted his girlfriend back.

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Parvati came in quietly, barely stirring the air around her. Connor sat with his back to the door, in a desk, tracing one hand through the dust. He wanted to see what she would do if she thought he hadn't noticed her. He had forced the matter, but it had to be her choice to talk about this, on some level, or it would never happen—or, at least, it wouldn't happen the way Connor wanted.

Thank you, Harry, for teaching me that.

She paused. Then her footsteps shuffled nearer and nearer, until Connor could pretend he'd just noticed her. He turned around, and spent a moment or two gazing at her. Her hair was braided with a pink ribbon he'd given her for her birthday last year, and she looked at his face and then away again, as if she didn't know where to glance. She wore a perfume that Connor was fairly sure was some sort of flower, but he had never bothered to learn what sort it was; he only thought of it as "Parvati's perfume."

He stood up. She stood there. A few moments passed, until Connor realized he would have to begin.

“You’re not acting very much like a Gryffindor, you know.”

Parvati jumped as if stung, and then scowled at him. Well, Connor had meant the words to sting. He folded his arms and mimicked her scowl. She mimicked his arm-folding.

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” Parvati said, voice turning icy. “Though I would very much like to.”

Connor heard the hardness in her voice, and had to fight to keep from smiling. There was the girl he loved—well, liked. Parvati stood her ground. She didn’t run. She should have come to him long before this. He thought she would have, except for what coming to him would mean admitting.

“You’re not acting brave,” he said. “Were you that scared about being proven wrong? Harry’s my brother. You should have known I wasn’t going to abandon him completely. When I saw you were wrong, then I was on his side. And now you’ve seen that he isn’t going to destroy the school.”

Parvati stirred restlessly, but didn’t answer him.

“Well?” Connor pushed. “The only answers I can think for your waiting this long are that you were scared or stupid, and I know you’re not stupid.”

“It changes everything!” Parvati suddenly flared at him, and her hands dropped to her hips. “Don’t you see, Connor? If I admit Harry’s right, then I have to fight beside him. I have to accept Malfoy and all the other Dark wizards and allies he’s got with him. I’ll have to do without house elves and order my meals from Hogsmeade like he does and perform my own cleaning charms, and I don’t want to. I grew up with house elves. I like house elves. I’ll have to start thinking differently about centaurs and goblins and all the other magical creatures that

I've despised because it's comfortable to despise them. If he's right, then I have to change myself, and I liked the person I was."

Connor blinked. "But you don't have to change everything," he said. "Harry doesn't make people do that. You could accept that he's not evil and still be wary of Dark wizards and eat the meals the Hogwarts house elves make and—"

"I know he doesn't make people change everything," Parvati interrupted with a sigh. "That's become obvious. But I would have to change everything, Connor, because that's the kind of person I am. I can't stand hypocrisy. I don't like being wrong, either, but hypocrisy is worse. All my principles have to be in accord. It's partly because he would be my brother-in-law, but it's not just that. I was horrified when I found out Dumbledore abused Harry, because that meant I'd been condoning child abuse by following him, even though I didn't know it. So all my principles have to align and flow from the same place."

"No, they don't," said Connor, because it was the only thing he could think of to say. He hadn't thought of adopting Harry's principles that deeply himself. Maybe some day he would stop eating meals prepared by house elves. When they weren't in Hogwarts would be a good time. And he got principles of free will and treating others well from him, but that was just common sense, wasn't it? And he had accepted that Draco mattered to Harry, and he would treat Draco that way from now on. But the rest could wait, and since Harry wouldn't force anyone to change unless they advanced to the point of murder like the Ministry had, Connor saw no need to force himself to change.

"Yes, they have to." Parvati swept a hand through her heavy hair, nearly disordering the ribbon that tied it. "For me, they do, because that's just the way I am. And I've talked to Padma, and she's the same way. But she doesn't have a problem, since she's always followed Harry, so it's not much of a change for her. It's a bigger change for me."

"So you're going to start ordering food from Hogsmeade?"

Parvati nodded, looking unhappy. "Yes, but that's expensive, and our parents can't afford to keep sending me money, so I'll have to

perform some cooking charms, too. And get better at conjuring food, and Transfiguring it. I'll be eating a lot of fruit for a few weeks." One of the things Professor Belluspersonna had showed them how to do was Transfigure dust into apples and pears. They tasted dusty, though, and even the best in the class, Hermione, could only make them taste like slightly rotted apples and pears.

"You don't have to," said Connor.

"Yes, I do," said Parvati, her face taking on a stubborn cast. "I can't believe something and do things that contradict that."

Connor frowned at her. "So you think that I'm being a hypocrite because I believe that house elves should be free but I eat Hogwarts food?"

"I didn't know you believed house elves should be free."

"Well, I do."

"Then you're being a hypocrite because you eat Hogwarts food." Parvati paused. "Unless you're someone like Malfoy, who can believe one thing but do the opposite. I think he believes all the awful things he used to say about Muggleborns, but he at least treats them civilly now."

"I'm not a hypocrite," Connor muttered.

"So you believe one thing but do the opposite?"

"No!"

"So you are a hypocrite."

Connor glared at her. Parvati glared back. Connor tried to remind himself that this was one of the things he loved about her—well, liked a lot—that she would retort and think she was right instead of just folding in an argument the way a lot of girls would. But all he could think right now was that when people converted to Harry's principles, they seemed to pick up his arguing style, too. Parvati wouldn't have

cared if Connor was like Malfoy, but he wasn't, so she expected better from him, the way Harry expected better from someone who accepted the Grand Unified Theory.

"You're stubborn," said Connor at last.

"I'm a stubborn witch who's going to apologize to Harry and get a lot better at Transfiguration," Parvati agreed calmly. Connor realized he should have talked to her before two months had passed. She'd had too much time to think about what she'd do. "And you? What are you going to do?"

"I want you to be my girlfriend again."

"We can do that," said Parvati. "But you need to think about not eating Hogwarts food, and cleaning your own bed."

"I don't know cleaning charms."

"I can teach you."

"I'm horrible with Transfiguring dust into food."

"I'll share my fruit."

"I don't—it's just convenient, Parvati, that's all."

"I'm sure Harry will help you buy food if you need to. And you have the Potter fortune, too."

Connor sighed. Both my brother and my girlfriend are determined to hound me. And when I confronted Parvati, I gave her the courage to make this change she was hesitating about, so in a way it's my fault. "We'll see."

Parvati gave him a brilliant smile and reached out to clasp his arm. "And we'll argue about it until you do see."

Being the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived is hard, Connor lamented, but then Parvati kissed him, and he could put his arms around her

“Because you’ve changed my mind.” Parvati cocked her head at him. “You were right, and I was wrong. You’re right about house elves needing to be freed, if the only reason they think well of us is that we’ve enchanted them to think that way. And you’re right about centaurs and goblins. They’ve been free for months, but they haven’t attacked us. And the Ministry should never have legalized werewolf killing.” She hesitated, and Connor could almost smell her gathering her courage. “And the Light owes you a debt, because we followed a man who treated you so badly, and for so long,” she said, forcing herself through the words. “So I agree with you now, and I’m going to start Transfiguring my food.”

Harry looked utterly gobsmacked. Connor treasured the expression. It wasn’t often he got to see that on his brother’s face.

Before he could say anything—not that Connor knew how he could do anything but accept the apology—there was a movement at the Ravenclaw table. Terry Boot stood up and moved away from the bench so that he was standing at Parvati’s level, though still a distance from her. “And I wanted to say that she’s right,” said Terry. “I don’t know if I can start eating food that house elves haven’t prepared yet, but I’m using cleaning charms on my bed and my clothes already, Harry. And you’re right. It doesn’t take long. There’s no reason that we should have to depend on house elves when we have our own magic.” He coughed and looked around, as though he didn’t know why the entire Great Hall was watching him, then gave Harry a stiff nod and sat down again.

Someone moved at the Hufflepuff table. Susan Bones stood up and bit her lip as Connor watched. She was flushing to the roots of her blonde hair, and since she had very clear skin, it was immediately noticeable.

“Um,” she said. “Um. My aunt was wrong, Harry. I thought you should know. And I’m learning cleaning charms so I can take care of my bedroom.” She paused. “Um. That’s all.” She sat down again with the look of someone spared execution.

Connor turned around to watch Harry’s face. He looked as if he had suddenly seen three phoenixes fly through the room. He took his

hand from Draco's wrist, using his shoulder, from the looks of it, to block some other spell, and leaned across the table to clasp Parvati's arm.

“Thank you,” he said, using a subtle charm on his voice that made it seem to sound in the ears of every person in the Great Hall. “I know how much it cost you to admit that. Change is never easy, and a change so fundamental to the way we live especially isn’t.” He looked straight into Parvati’s face. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to make you understand how much I appreciate this.”

Parvati smiled in a way that would have made Connor jealous if he hadn't known that Harry was only interested in Draco, and Parvati was only interested in him, and Draco would have drawn and quartered anyone else who touched Harry with romantic intent, anyway. "Your eyes say it pretty well," she said, and squeezed Harry's hand. "Thank you. It took me forever to make up my mind, but Connor gave me the courage to do it yesterday." She turned her head and fixed her eyes proudly on Connor.

And then everyone in the Great Hall was looking at him. Luckily, Connor had four years of practice in dealing with that. He nodded back to all their looks, and ignored the frankly disbelieving expressions, like the one that came from Hermione.

What? He hoped his manner conveyed that silent message. I give people the courage to declare their minds all the time.

Inwardly, of course, he was beaming, and he let the beam flood his face when Parvati walked away from the Slytherin table and gave him a kiss, and then Ron clapped him on the back hard enough to stagger him, and some of the people in the Great Hall actually started applauding. Headmistress McGonagall joined in, too, her eyes more than proud.

Connor grinned, and kissed Parvati back, and waited until they were done before he went away to fly, because flying was the only way he knew how to deal with joy this extreme.

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Dart and roll and dip and turn, and the turn whipped him around so fast that Connor felt as if the blood were sloshing in his head. He pulled up, laughing.

He wondered that Harry didn't fall from the Firebolt he rode, since he didn't use it that often. Connor, of course, rode the one Harry'd got him for Christmas all the time, when Ron wasn't taking turns on it, and he knew how to master it. By now, he knew almost everything about it, including how to stay on when it turned upside-down because he gave it the wrong command.

The wooden broom and Snitch that Mark had sent him, which he'd enchanted to dart around like the golden Snitch, drifted past him. They were slower than the real thing, but they gave him training in catching things that were almost invisible, since they didn't shine. Connor put out his hand and caught them both at once, laughing again. He had a fast broom under him, he had the Pitch to himself to practice, why shouldn't he be happy?

A yank centered behind his navel, so hard that Connor gasped. His first thought was that he was falling from the Firebolt, or that someone had hexed the broom to tip him off. Then he recognized the colors dancing all around him, and he realized he was in the middle of a Portkeying.

But I checked the broom and the Snitch for Portkey spells—

But not for time-delayed Portkey spells, or ones that only activate when two objects are put together.

He was cursing when the colors spun him out in an unfamiliar place, and he let go of the wooden broom and Snitch as soon as he could. He turned his head quickly to take in his surroundings, clamping his legs on the Firebolt. From now on, no opening unfamiliar gifts in the post, he told himself sternly.

He hovered above an enormous garden, which made him think of Indigena Yaxley, which made him tense up enough to cause the Firebolt to swerve to one side. But none of the plants reached for him

and tried to devour him, so that was reassuring. The garden was mostly snow and rock, anyway, with the black stones arranged to thrust above the snowbanks in what Connor supposed was some sort of artistic pattern. He didn't know; he'd never been interested in gardening, and the estates at Lux Aeterna were under the care of the brownies.

There was one clear patch in a corner of the garden, he saw. An enormous bush grew there, obviously protected by warming charms from the winter, and white blossoms nodded on it. Other flowers grew in a circle around it; Connor could see their colors from here. He bit his lip and tried to remember what he could about plants like that from Herbology. The big bush was hawthorn, wasn't it?

"Welcome, Connor."

He whipped the Firebolt in a circle. A man had just rounded a stone wall that Connor assumed backed up on a house, though the wall tingled with wards that rendered the building itself invisible. He had a large grin, and dark eyes, and dark hair, and Connor hadn't seen him often, but the first time was by the lake in Hogwarts the night he found out he wasn't the Boy-Who-Lived after all, and that was hard to forget.

"Rosier," he said, and hoped that his voice didn't shake. A Gryffindor was supposed to be brave. He was too busy concentrating on the other man's wand hand to notice if his voice did shake.

The Death Eater laughed, and undid his left sleeve, tilting his arm so that Connor could see the Dark Mark. "Really," he said. "I would have thought you would be warier of someone writing to you with the name of Mark."

And Connor felt like a fool, but at least he was only a fool. He wasn't a crazy bastard.

"You're a crazy bastard," he told Rosier.

Rosier didn't appear to appreciate hearing this, for all that it was true. He turned his left arm so that Connor could no longer see the Mark—

and that was fine, he didn't want to look at it, it was all ugly, and made uglier by the red pattern around it, as though it were infected—and drew his wand.

Connor put one hand on his own wand, but he knew he wouldn't be able to stand up to most of the curses Rosier threw. He'd used a Severing Curse on Hermione in the Midsummer battle, and Hermione was magically stronger than Connor was. So Connor should only meet Rosier spell for spell if he absolutely had to.

A deep buzzing rode his ears. He wasn't sure if he was afraid or not. Trembling raced through his muscles, but that could be from the adrenaline that was crashing into his veins. He could feel it coming, and it made him remember that this man had been there when Harry's hand was cut off. Connor wasn't sure he could fight him, but he wasn't sure if he could depend on rescue, either, so he would have to try.

And if he'd wanted an easy kill, Rosier really shouldn't have transported him aboard his Firebolt.

Rosier cast a curse that bloomed in racing tongues of blue flame. Before it was halfway to him, Connor was safely away, spinning his broom around in a circle that was usually used to chase an unwilling Snitch. The flames sprouted past him and then died uselessly in midair.

Rosier used a lightning curse. One couldn't outrun a lightning curse, as Moody had taught them in those thirteen frantic days before Midsummer, but one could fool an enemy into putting it where one wasn't. Connor dodged to the left, and so Rosier cast the curse to the left, but by then Connor was blasting away to the right.

He wondered if he should race away across the landscape, in turn. But he had no clue where he was, no clue if there were other Death Eaters around, and no idea if perhaps Rosier could take the wooden broom and Snitch and use them to get inside Hogwarts's wards. If he did, then it would be Connor's fault. And there were the people who might be in the house, too. Maybe Rosier had killed them all, but maybe not.

And the thought lingered in Connor's mind that if he could kill or wound Rosier, then he wouldn't be able to hurt Harry in the future.

One thing, at least, he had to do. So while Rosier incanted a long and complicated pain curse, Connor swept in low to the ground. Rosier paused to watch him, and laughed, as if he were wondering if Connor would crash his broom and saw him the trouble.

Connor was looking, though. He found the wooden broom and Snitch lying in the snow, and he flicked his wand, thinking, Incendio! A moment later, they were charred ashes, and Rosier wasn't going anywhere using them.

Rosier didn't like that. He snarled, and some cutting curse caught Connor across the back. He yelled, and rose straight up into the air, cursing between his teeth at the pain. It hurt like fire, it hurt like hell, it hurt like a hit by a razor-tipped Bludger right across his muscles and flesh—

It made him really angry.

Professor Snape had told him once that when he was angrier, or thinking about defending Harry, his magic got stronger. He turned around and aimed his wand in Rosier's general direction. The spell he wanted to cast didn't need to be aimed directly at Rosier.

“Calefacto!”

The ground around Rosier heated, the snow rising in a cloud of steam. A moment later, Rosier gave a faint yelp. He might find the pain pleasant, from what Harry had told Connor, but at least the steam blocked his vision and gave Connor a moment to circle and think about what spell would take the crazy bastard out.

Not a spell.

Connor debated for a single fierce moment about whether or not this was right, but he had even less time to think about it than he'd had in the Midsummer battle. As the steam dissipated, he leaned over his

broom and caught Rosier's eye. Rosier had his head upturned, and was laughing, and quoting some poet. Connor made himself not pay attention to that. Instead, he swung his will like a whip, sending home a lash of compulsion directly into Rosier's brain.

Drop your wand.

Rosier's hand opened, and his wand tumbled to the dirt. At the same time, his thoughts began to writhe in Connor's hold, fighting him. Connor grimaced. The feel of his mind was unpleasant, pulpy. The only time he'd felt something more disgusting was when he'd briefly tried to compel Voldemort in Sirius's body to let him go, when that madman had captured him in third year and tried to use him against Harry. That had been dark and stinking corruption, and this wasn't much better. It was very hard to compel someone insane.

And what he should do with the compulsion...

Connor swallowed. He knew what he should probably do, especially since Rosier hadn't just hurt Harry. He'd hurt Hermione so badly she had to spend months in bed, and before that he'd caught her last winter and done something she still wouldn't talk about. So Connor should make sure he couldn't cause any more trouble.

His morals fought against it, though. Could he look into Rosier's eyes and send the silent command Die, and really mean it?

He'd never tried. He'd just controlled people's bodies and changed their thoughts.

Rosier very nearly fought free from him; his mind made a flapping fish look dry. Connor took a deep breath, and started to turn his Firebolt back to where he could clearly see Rosier's face.

"Enjoying yourself, Evan?"

The instant shock of hatred that flooded Rosier's mind made Connor lose his grip. He cursed and spun higher, clutching his wand as he watched a woman stride from around the wall and towards Rosier.

She was smiling, he thought, but she looked so strange that it was hard to be sure.

This was Indigena Yaxley. Connor knew it by the green tendrils in her hair and the way two thorns trailed behind her like obedient puppies. And, from this angle, the shadows in her skin were so prominent that she looked like a walking bush. He shuddered and flew higher.

Rosier was snarling at Yaxley, the kind of low sound Connor thought a rabid werewolf would make. Yaxley didn't seem at all bothered by it. She halted a few feet away from Rosier and gazed at him. Connor couldn't see if she was looking at one specific place on his body, or something he carried.

"Having bad dreams, Evan?" she all but whispered.

Rosier screamed, snatching up his wand, and the next minute Yaxley burst into flames. Well, she tried, at least. Her leaves writhed and danced, and then the fire went out. Yaxley shook her head as she drew her wand.

"Really, Evan, you must learn to control yourself," she murmured. "Fire is such a pedestrian weapon. I had thought my thorns taught you more refined methods of pain." She looked up at Connor and waved a hand at him. "Hello!" she called. "Sorry for this, but we did have to perform a test, and you were made the subject a long time ago. I would have been here sooner, but—"

Someone else came around the stone wall. Connor blinked, and fought the urge to rub his eyes. Mrs. Parkinson? What is she doing here? Well, I suppose it could be her house...

He'd met Hawthorn several times now, most recently at Christmas, and she'd always impressed him as a kind and thoughtful person, even though she was Dark. He did not know what to make of the expression on her face now, as she gazed at Indigena Yaxley. Yaxley watched her back as if she had all the time in the world.

Hawthorn and Rosier cast curses both at once, though Hawthorn's was red and Rosier's was black. Both hit Yaxley and bounced, the

tight shield of plants beneath her skin doing the work, Connor supposed. He flew in a tight little circle, trying to decide what he should do. Curses were flying now, incredibly fast, and he knew he wasn't good enough to go and help. And he wasn't sure if he ought to attack Yaxley or Rosier, either. He didn't know who was more dangerous.

Then Rosier turned away from Yaxley and lifted his wand to the sky. Connor braced himself as a red zigzag flew out. This was a Hunting Curse, and it would follow him wherever he went on the broom. Rosier had probably only waited to use it because Hunting Curses didn't cause much pain, and he wanted to play.

"Evan, honestly," said Yaxley, like someone annoyed by the actions of a small child, and pointed her wand at the Hunting Curse. It dissipated. She closed her eyes in the next moment, bowing her head and laying her wand across her left arm. Connor had to admit to a reluctant admiration, that she could simply stand there and ignore all the magic that Hawthorn was firing, and the other woman's enraged, hate-filled screams.

The next moment, Rosier howled as if stung by bees, and then Apparated out. Yaxley glanced up at Connor and waved again.

"We'll see each other. I look forward to the meeting," she said, with a smile, and Apparated herself. And then Connor was hovering over Hawthorn Parkinson's garden with melted snow beneath him and the sizzle of curses fading around him, and the cut across his shoulders stinging like hell.

Hawthorn lowered her wand only slowly. She was looking at the hawthorn bush with the flowers around it, Connor saw. Her face was blank, but slowly filling with emotions he didn't want to see.

And he needed help.

"Um, Mrs. Parkinson?"

Hawthorn shook her head sharply and glanced up. A moment later, the frightening expression was gone, and she gave a sad little smile.

"This is not the way I would have chosen to bring you to my home, Mr. Potter," she murmured. "But, nevertheless, welcome to the Garden. If you'll come down, I'll heal your wounds, and Apparate you back to Hogwarts."

Connor nodded, and told himself his wariness was of no account. Hawthorn had been a Death Eater. That didn't mean she still was. He took the Firebolt down slowly, as the cut hurt more and more, and plowed a trail in the snow as he landed.

Hawthorn didn't appear to notice. She was looking at the hawthorn bush again.

Then she shook her head and turned to Connor, her mouth thinning. "I don't know how they got through my wards," she said. "But I will learn. And I will find and kill Indigena Yaxley."

Connor shivered, and not from the cold.

The next moment, Hawthorn was the kind woman he had met at Christmas again, circling behind him to exclaim softly over his wound, and mix scolding for staying in the battle with praise for how well he had done. Connor relaxed. He was used to mothers.

He did wonder why Rosier had wanted him here in the first place, and what Indigena Yaxley had come for. But, well—

Rosier is a crazy bastard. And Yaxley is the Thorn Bitch. Do either of them really need a reason for whatever insanity they planned? They were both mad enough to become Death Eaters.

He was much more interested in the cessation of pain from his cut, and then what he would say to Harry—well, try to say—to avoid a scolding when he returned home.

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Hail, Joy

Harry put his forehead in his hand. "Right," he said, but his voice sounded hollow even to him. "So you received a wooden Snitch after you received a silver Snitch from a man you knew was Rosier?"

"Yes." Connor sounded sulky and defiant and embarrassed all at once. He had sounded that way ever since Hawthorn brought him back to the school and explained to Harry, in quiet but emphatic terms, his little adventure. Harry had then been forced to deal with Connor's explanation, which emphasized what he called "heroics" and played down what Harry was inclined to call "stupidity."

He would have asked Hawthorn to remain and add details, but the look in her eyes, frozen and dark, had made him realize how badly she needed to be alone. She had just realized that her daughter's murderer was still alive, her vengeance still incomplete, and unlikely to be completed any time soon, if the way that Indigena resisted her curses was any indication.

There were words Harry could have spoken about vengeance and obsession. The latter passion was one he knew himself, in at least half its variations. But he had thought it best to let her go.

I can't dictate the terms of her emotions to her, especially when the biggest step she took to get over grieving Pansy turns out to be a false one. And who knows? She may yet get to kill Indigena in battle. We're enemies.

So instead he sat in the Room of Requirement, the quietest place he could find on such short notice. The Gryffindor common room and the Slytherin one were both full of students studying or playing, since the weather outside was too foul to encourage anyone to go there, and Draco was studying Animagus training in their bedroom and wouldn't want to be disturbed. And anyway, he would have been too eager to help punish Connor.

"Why didn't you tell me about this Mark person?" Harry decided that was the most important thing to settle. He could accept his brother being this mistaken, actually. It wasn't even as bad as the willful

stupidity Connor had set himself on in third year, when he had understood the general terms of the situation between Harry and Lily but refused to find out specifics. Harry couldn't figure out why Connor hadn't told him about Mark at all.

"Because his information matched the information that you were sending from Woodhouse, and I thought he was a real person," Connor explained. "And—well, I knew you would probably say it was dangerous, Harry. And you knew I was writing someone. A friend."

"I didn't know about the name, and the gifts."

Connor scoffed. "Tell me that you would have thought the name actually a clue, Harry. Yes, it was a pun on the Dark Mark, but there are real people named Mark, you know."

Harry controlled the impulse to grab his brother by the shoulders and shake him. For one thing, he only had one hand, and that meant it would hardly be an impressive gesture. For another, perhaps he wouldn't have picked it up, either. He had to admit the justice of Connor's observation.

But the Snitches were something else again.

"Why did you continue corresponding with him when he left Woodhouse?" he asked, controlling his own impulse to ask more questions about that. Connor had already admitted that he knew nothing about Mark but what "Mark" told him, and it was extremely unlikely Rosier would have given any information away when he started his little game in Hawthorn's garden. Harry wondered if Connor had yet worked out that Rosier's accurate information about Woodhouse meant they had a traitor somewhere in their ranks.

"I wanted to. He wrote me as a friend, not just because I was the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived." Connor shrugged, but the expression on his face was not entirely mutinous; it was wistful, too. "I'm sure you don't need reminding of this, Harry, but it gets a little lonely being in the shadow of that name."

Harry caged words that would have done more harm than good behind his teeth, and nodded. It would have been worse for Connor than for him, even, because Connor had had twelve years of believing that he was the Boy-Who-Lived, while Harry's training had managed to insulate him from jealousy and loneliness for nearly that long.

"That makes more sense, then," he said. "But the Snitches, Connor."

"I tested the wooden one for Portkey spells!" Connor folded his arms. "And other spells that I thought could harm me. But I didn't think to look for a time-delayed Portkey spell. Tell me that you would have thought to look for it, Harry. Look me in the eye and say that."

And then something very strange happened. Harry's first impulse was to sigh and glance away, again admitting the justice of what Connor said.

What he said was, "I wouldn't have needed to look for it, because I would have been suspicious about the second Snitch I received after the silver one, and taken it to someone like Peter, who could help me look for spells like that."

His tone was snappish, even. Harry blinked. Connor, sitting across from him, seemed taken aback.

The next moment, Harry held up his hand and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Connor. No. I didn't even know time-delayed Portkey spells were possible. But Rosier consistently does the impossible." He leaned forward. "I'm glad that you're all right, more than anything." Even though I want to yell at you for being stupid. But the yelling would only make Connor more mulish and stubborn and devoted to argument, and right now Harry needed the details of the battle from him. "Now, tell me everything that you can remember about the conversation Rosier and Yaxley had."

Connor relaxed and did. Harry bit his lip hard when he heard Yaxley's comment about bad dreams. He knew a man who had had more than his share of those in the past few months.

“And how did Rosier react?” he asked.

Connor shrugged. “He went mad. I don’t know. I thought it was a reference to a private joke.”

And there’s the infected Dark Mark. Harry did not yet know what to make of that. Snape’s Dark Mark had been infected before the Midsummer battle. So had Lucius’s, Hawthorn’s, Adalrico’s, and Peter’s. And Regulus’s had been infected before he departed into the paintings. Harry had assumed at the time that it was some new trick of Voldemort’s, and had ended when Harry cut the hole in his magical core, blocking his ability to reach out to his former Death Eaters across that distance.

But perhaps the potions Snape had brewed to ease the pain of the infected Marks both before and after the battle had had their effect. Lucius, who hadn’t taken those potions until he was able to enter Hogwarts, had had the infection longer than the others. Rosier, meanwhile, had been without them entirely, and the red tracing Connor described around his Mark sounded familiar from the infection patterns Harry had seen.

Of course, there was the question of why Rosier and Yaxley would have lured Connor to Hawthorn’s garden at all, and why Yaxley’s question had made Rosier so angry, if he already knew the infected Dark Mark was connected to his nightmares.

“Harry?”

“Hmmm?” Harry looked up, to see Connor pushing his chair back from the table the room had conjured for them, and looking apologetic.

“Do you need any more details, or can I leave? Only I should tell Parvati that I’m back. Merlin knows if she’s heard anything by now, but I want to tell her myself that I’m all right.”

Harry nodded and smiled. “Yes, we’re done. And be sure to tell her thanks again for her announcement this morning.”

Connor's face softened, and a proud smile overtook it—a smile that Harry had sometimes felt on his face when he looked at Draco, or seen on Lucius's when he looked at Narcissa's. "She's something, isn't she?" he said quietly, and then turned away and left before Harry could answer.

Harry stood. He would contact the other former Death Eaters—well, he would speak face-to-face with Peter and Snape, and send a letter to Lucius—and ask them about bad dreams and infected Dark Marks. He expected a negative answer, though. Snape's dreams had been Sanctuary dreams, from what he knew, and Joseph would have been able to sense if there were evil intent within them. And none of his other allies had reported nightmares.

But there was the chance of—

What?

Well, he really could not say what, unless he knew what Yaxley and Rosier had planned. There was the question of Snape's dreams, and the Dark Marks, and the traitor in Woodhouse.

And there was the moment when Harry had snapped at Connor, allowing his anger and sarcasm brief rein, instead of the sympathy that he knew were most effective after the initial scolding.

Harry shook his head as he left the Room of Requirement. That one, I don't understand. Has some other barrier broken in me? Was it a sign that I'm letting myself go more? Joseph will know. I should seek his opinion on Snape's dreams, anyway.

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“No,” said Joseph firmly. “Severus’s dreams were normal for the Sanctuary, Harry. They brought him face-to-face with bad memories he’d suppressed. It’s usually only those memories that any person faces, since they’ve had a chance to get past and heal from others. The rare exception is torments that keep recurring as if they were still happening, and then the dreams take care to show those entrenched

sorrows from another angle. And the dreams have ceased now. He told you that?"

Harry nodded. "He said he'd returned to having dreams that he can hardly remember unless they're particularly vivid, and that's the normal state of things with him." Snape had scowled when he asked, and that more than anything else had reassured Harry he was growing stronger, beginning to escape from the long prison of his memories. The half-hysterical defensiveness he'd displayed at the beginning of the autumn term was still clear in Harry's own memory.

"That is Severus," Joseph agreed. He leaned forward and clasped his hands in front of him. "And you had some other reason for coming to talk to me today, Harry. What was it?"

Harry grinned ruefully. "Am I that obvious?"

"Now, you are."

Harry nodded and leaned back, half-closing his eyes as he sought to describe his unusual outburst with Connor. Joseph waited. Harry had learned to like the listening silence that surrounded the man, silence of a different quality than that around Vera, which always suggested half-heard answers. If nothing else, when Joseph was waiting to speak, he wasn't actually speaking the complex statements that made Harry reevaluate himself often and sometimes hate him a little.

"I spoke to Connor for one moment without controlling my emotions," Harry began carefully. "I told him that I would have taken the mysterious gifts he was receiving, which endangered his life today, at once to someone more experienced with Dark magic so he could check them for unknown spells. But the truth is that I might not have, so I was being hypocritical. Besides, it wasn't the best thing to say at that point in time. Connor needed comfort and gentleness and caring just then. He'd just been kidnapped by Rosier and nearly killed, for Merlin's sake. So I don't know why I said it. I wondered if it was a sign of something else strange happening in me, a barrier that's been let down which I didn't know was falling."

Joseph said nothing. Harry waited until he couldn't stand it any longer, and then peeked from under his eyelids so that he could see the expression on Joseph's face. Joseph had his mouth slightly open, and then he broke into delighted laughter as Harry watched. He blinked.

"Er. Sir?"

Joseph held up a hand and shook his head. Harry waited for the laughter to stop, smiling himself in the meantime, and trying not to let worry conquer his gladness at the sight of so much merriment. Was something wrong? Had he broken some barrier Joseph hadn't anticipated him breaking?

Finally, the laughter stopped enough to let the Seer speak. Joseph still had traces of it in his eyes and around his mouth as he leaned forward and fixed his gaze on Harry.

"What you have done is entirely normal," he said.

"For what stage of barrier-breaking?" Harry asked.

"I mean, normal," Joseph said. "We all make slips of the tongue, Harry. We all say insensitive things at the wrong moment. And we're all hypocrites sometimes. I've had a rather forceful reminder of that in the last five months, talking with Severus. He would have been breathing fire if you'd tried to have dreams and hide their contents from him in the same way he did with you. Yet he had no problem preserving those memories for conversations between us, and he deliberately made the conversations as uncomfortable for me as he could—the one thing he would have insisted that you not do in your own healing."

"So that means...what?" Harry waved his hand in the air and let it fall.

"Welcome to the real world, Harry." Joseph no longer had the laughter in his expression, but he smiled with his eyes and his lips and his whole face, the most sincere and deepest smile Harry had seen in a long time. "You've advanced to the point where you can make mistakes and not feel such guilt over them that you castigate

yourself for days. And it's with your brother, no less, once the whole center and pivot of your existence. That is such a good sign that I cannot quite name how important it is."

"But—" Harry had a sudden horrible vision of himself prancing through the world and hurting people without realizing it. Merlin knew he did enough of that already, because he simply didn't understand some of the principles others took for granted. "Does that mean I'm doomed to be a hypocrite and inflict wounds on souls?"

"No more than all of us," said Joseph firmly. "And yes, Harry, that does happen—with me, with Severus, with your Malfoy, with your brother, with you, with everyone. What I think you've failed to understand this time is that those mistakes aren't unforgivable. One can be selfish and make up for it later. Or someone can take a wound that stings one day and forget about it entirely the next. Not everyone holds grudges for a lifetime. Not everyone will hate you and plot vengeance against you for a slight. And you need not beggar yourself, in time or money, making extravagant gestures of sympathy and appeal and submission to those you've wronged."

Harry blinked at the far wall. He'd known that all his life, of course, but it seemed like a revelation to him.

This is the first time I've felt it, I think. Before, I might have believed it, but it was only an intellectual belief. This is like the difference between someone telling me I can fly on a broom and actually doing it.

"So I don't have to be perfect," he whispered.

"If there are any traces of that remaining in you, Harry, get rid of them," Joseph responded, sounding serious now. "There is no way for you to be perfect anyway, but in the waters you've chosen to swim, it's especially important. If you flinch from every instance of hurting someone, you can't argue for free will in any capacity. If you try in haste to repair every mistake you make, you'll cause worse wounds. And if you think that you're doing all you can and no one can blame you for certain moves or motives, then you'll end up selfish without

even realizing it. Someone can always blame you. Escaping blame isn't the thing that matters."

Harry immediately thought of the Horcruxes, and how his studying obsessively about them must have seemed selfish to Draco, and perhaps also to Regulus, who had risked his life for the information and felt so bad on the day he gave it to Harry. And what would have happened if Harry had insisted on intervening in Loki's sacrifice, simply because it made him feel bad to watch the death and he wanted Loki to live? Selfishness, again, though he could tell himself it wasn't because he was rescuing someone else from certain death and rescuing the pack from having to become cannibals.

Everything is selfish from some perspective.

Ideas he hadn't had before cracked like lightning across his mind. And what I need to do is establish a perspective I can trust. Self-critical, of course, because a vates needs to be. Honest, because I need to detect lies in myself. But critical of others, too, because they're not always whitewashed, and able to make declarations and enforce certain boundaries when they're hurting others—or me, I matter too—and able to forgive myself when I've done something that isn't really all that great a mistake.

He leaned forward and put his head in his hand.

"Harry?" Joseph had crossed the room in one stride and crouched beside him with his fingers resting on his arm.

"I'm all right," Harry whispered. "Just give me a moment."

He was seeing a new vision in his mind, which was also a very old one: the winding path of possibilities, twined in green and gold, the colors of Dark and Light, leading away before him, providing a chance to correct mistakes once made, and the more glorious for mistakes and errors and other times when the walker would slip and fall, flowering with all the grander chances and potential inherent in the soul.

Only this time, the path was his.

And he imagined that twining with all the paths that other people could take, snaking among them, intersecting with certain threads and cutting off others and tangling in a complicated relationship of snarl and counter-snarl with still more, and whirling apart and around and continuing on, but always coming back, dancing with Draco and his enemies and his friends and Connor and the centaurs and the house elves and the dead and Voldemort, because they all shared the same world. The dead, if nothing else, had a mental share in the world of the living.

He would still need to be careful, because his mistakes could cause more damage than the mistakes of others, thanks to the responsibilities he'd picked up. But he had the opportunity to do more good, too, and he would never fulfill those opportunities if he never took a risk and expanded his boundaries to learn what he could do. He had before only used confrontation and direct consultation when pushed. Even the conversations with Joseph, which had done him so much good, had taken Snape giving him a push to enter.

But that was silly. His own word should be enough. His own dedication should be enough, helped along but not solely provided by others. He had to be active in dancing his own path, because no one else was going to do it for him without making him less than he could be in the process.

A wave of light crashed into his mind.

And that's why Lily's treatment of me was wrong. I said once I mourned for all the people she could have been. But she took away the people I could have been, too. And that was wrong, as wrong with me as it would have been if she'd done it to Connor, if Lucius had done it to Draco, if Parvati's parents had done it to her.

People had told him that before. Harry had been willing to mouth the words.

Now, he felt it.

He realized he was crying, or, at least, something like tears rimmed his eyes. He touched them with a finger, and wondered if they came from sadness or joy. Was he thinking more about the past and the waste it had been, or the future and what he could still have, now that he knew this?

He did regret, fiercely, certain parts of Lily's training now that before he had valued, especially his ability to withdraw behind emotional walls. How much of life had it kept him from?

But he would not allow the regret to destroy him, any more than he could allow one obsession to consume him. He was changing, growing, and if she had marked him, she made up an increasingly smaller part of who he was. He had said as much when he defended her at the trial. Then, though, he had not thought of growing more. He had believed he would always retain the exact same balance of Lily's training and his own thoughts, the new ones.

He hadn't. He was moving on, had moved on already, and was starting to begin a new life.

He could make mistakes now, and it was all right. He could do normal things if he wanted to, and it was all right. And he could make the decisions that he still needed to make, because he was vates and this was war, and it was all right. And he could defend those decisions, because he needed to trust himself.

It was all right.

He stood and shook his head. Joseph drew slowly back from him, his eyes wide, focused in that way that Harry knew meant he was looking at the complex of his soul, not the surface of his body.

"I—" And Joseph was silent and shook his head. Harry wondered if he could explain what he saw. It was all right if he couldn't. Harry didn't think he could describe his own vision to the Seer right now, either. Perhaps later, when it wouldn't feel like blasphemy to put it into words.

He smiled at him, said, "Pardon me. There are things I need to do," and then turned and made his way rapidly back down the dungeon hallways, to a door he'd shut behind him not an hour before.

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Snape looked up sharply from his purple potion when a knock sounded on his door. He cast the last Permanence Charm he needed to keep the belladonna from reacting with the palm leaves while still watching the door mistrustfully. Who could be coming to see him at this time of day, on a Saturday? Harry had been here not long ago. Snape had no detentions planned. And he didn't want to talk to Joseph right now, because it would undoubtedly turn into a lecture on the morality of brewing poisons.

Whoever it was knocked again, and then Harry's voice called out, "Severus? Please, I need to talk to you."

Snape rapidly cast the standard stasis spell that would keep the potion in exactly the same state he left it, and then strode across his office. He could hear a catch in Harry's voice, and that he had called him by his first name without prompting—

He flung his door open, and found Harry leaning against the wall with his head bowed. Snape reached down, ready to gather him into his office, support him from falling, or do whatever else needed to be done.

Harry lifted his head.

Snape could only stare, transfixed. He had never seen pure, unclouded joy in Harry's eyes before. He was not sure he had seen it at all for fifteen years, since the day on which most people believed Voldemort to be defeated forever.

Harry laughed, and then flung his arms around Snape, a hug neither companionable nor consoling. Snape did not know what to make of it, and stood there, arms frozen, hands twitching.

“Thank you,” Harry whispered. “I finally understand why you brought my parents and Dumbledore to trial, why you did it for the sake of my past as well as my future. And I forgive whatever anger I might still hold towards you. Thank you, Severus. Thank you.”

Snape could put his arms around Harry’s shoulders then, but it was half a nerveless fall; he didn’t have the strength to keep them aloft any more. He closed his eyes, and wondered if this was what it felt like to have one of the more recent wounds in his soul heal itself.

“What brought this on?” he did manage to whisper.

“Joseph.” Harry’s voice had a sound of song. “And I’m sure sometimes I’ll want to curse him as well as bless him, because being this open to the world means that I’m going to make a lot more mistakes from now on. But that hardly matters right now. I’m just—I feel human. Can you believe it?”

Snape was the one who needed the support of the doorway then. There were no words he had less expected to hear while he lived.

Harry held on a moment more, then spun away, as though he were a Snitch, too small and too light to stay in one place. “I have to go do something else,” he said intensely. “I’ll tell you about it after dinner. But I have to do it now.” He started to run away up the hall.

“Is it dangerous?” Snape called after him.

Harry whirled around to smile at him, but didn’t stop running. “Not this time,” he said, which made no sense, but he vanished before Snape could stop him.

He stood there a long moment, staring after Harry, and realizing he had no idea what would happen next.

He went slowly back into his office, and shut the door behind him, then stood there, at a loss. Brewing a poison had suddenly lost its appeal.

And the most irritating thing was that he could not even say why.

“Are you ready?”

There was a dark shine in his scales, a softened, blurred four-point star. Harry concentrated his attention on it, all his will, and then leaped forward.

He brought his magic down like a hammer on the last of Bellatrix's curses on his left wrist.

Harry didn't want it to remain.

He wove his will into his magic, envisioning it as strands of white silk, as delicate and yet as subtly strong as the material of a spider's web. He wrapped his wanting and his desire and his objection to having the curse remain around the end of his wrist, and then he drew it tight. The sharp points of the dark star were cutting through his strands as fast as he could spin them, but that was all right. They were simply not numerous enough to cut through them all.

Harry wove tighter and tighter, and caught and crumpled one dark green point, and whirled in towards the center of the curse.

And then he was within it, seeing and understanding the spell in his mind even as he watched its reflection shift and change in Argutus's scales, and he wanted to laugh aloud. Bellatrix had been clever. This part of the curse depended on desire. The person who broke the curse had to want to actually break it. And the curse's outer shell was designed to softly discourage that, to cast the perception that everything was better off just as it was, and changing was too hard.

Harry brought up his image of the green and gold path in defiance of that passivity, a soft and seductive trap he knew all too well, and the curse hissed like someone sucking in his breath.

By my desire and by my will, this is the end, Harry replied, and then slammed forward, as strongly as he had when he had to break the egg-shaped stone the centaurs favored to save Draco's life, as strongly as he had when he wanted to set the house elves free, as determined as he had been to drain Voldemort's magic and cut a hole in his magical core.

This time, though, for himself.

And the world did not end, and he did not fall down writhing in self-doubt and self-blame and self-guilt.

The curse did end, though, with a ringing expansion of black that covered Harry's sight for a moment. He had to close his eyes. When he could look again, the first thing he glanced at was Argutus's scales.

They reflected only a normal left wrist, without magic of any kind on it.

Harry dropped back on his bed, and laughed, and laughed, and laughed, until he was short of breath and tears ran down his face again. Argutus crawled from his neck and shoulders onto his chest to be more comfortable, a great warm length of glimmering flesh and muscle.

“That was fun,” he said. “I think I should look into curse-breaking for the goblins. If they are all that fun, then I want to work for Gringotts. They would not have to pay me, except in dead rabbits.”

Harry stroked Argutus’s head, and Argutus flicked out his tongue to touch his hand. Harry held up his other wrist, his left wrist, and looked at it.

It served no one anymore for him not to get a hand. Just because he broke the curse for his own reasons, just because he sought a little of his own pleasure and his own joy, did not mean it would cost others their happiness.

Oh, there were decisions he could make and pleasures he could seek that would, of course. Voldemort was the living exemplar of that. But he would learn them, and know them, and keep away from them where he could, and keep dancing along that path his epiphany had shown him.

For the first time he could remember, Harry had the sense that life was there to be tasted, and taken, and sampled, and he wanted to live as intensely as he had ever wanted anything.

And if it becomes necessary for me to die in this war or to destroy a Horcrux, then I know what I’ll be giving up, for the very first time. And if someone else dies as a sacrifice, this, this is what they’ll be giving up.

The horror he’d felt at the thought of someone else dying sharpened into sheer appreciation of what such a death could mean. Harry took a deep breath, and then forced himself past that moment and into the moments that lay beyond it.

And the free yielding of such splendor as this is the greatest sacrifice, the grandest decision, anyone could make.

If people have to die to destroy the Horcruxes, they will be heroes. Heroes in a way that I don’t think people can be just by living, or by dying.

But he would continue researching ways to get around that prohibition and the Unassailable Curse more fiercely than ever, now that he knew what it could entail giving up.

Harry sat up and stretched. Draco would return from dinner soon. Harry would need to eat, and he would research on Horcruxes for an hour, and he would do some schoolwork that really needed to be done.

Draco shouldn't have to push me back into life anymore. Now that I know it's always there to be lived, I'm going to do it myself.

Chapter Sixty: Prometheus Unbound

Draco opened the bedroom door slowly, keeping his wand out. Harry hadn't been at dinner, and Professor Snape had come in looking more than a little shocked, as if he had seen a unicorn gallop through the dungeons. Draco couldn't discount that something had happened to Harry. It probably wasn't something bad, because otherwise Professor Snape would have looked murderous, but even merely "unexpected" was often also "inconvenient."

He'd even approached Potter and asked, but Potter, the prat, hadn't known anything. Draco had stung him with an insult and gone away. He was sure that he would have known more than Potter about Harry if Harry were his brother.

The bedroom appeared empty at first, but then Draco realized the curtains were drawn on the near side of the bed. He steeled himself to find Harry wounded or sick, and yanked them open.

Harry turned his head towards him.

Draco actually dropped his wand. He was just glad that no one else was in the room to see that wholly embarrassing and rather unnecessary episode. He didn't immediately reach down and pick it up, either. He couldn't take his gaze from his partner's face.

Some shadow that had lingered in the back of his eyes had gone away. Some tension that had always hunched his shoulders had vanished. Some darkness that had—

And then Draco decided he should stop using metaphors and actually ask Harry, because Harry had lifted himself onto his knees, reached out, caught Draco's shoulder with his hand, and leaned forward to kiss him. Or, well, all right. He'd ask him when the kiss was done.

Draco responded automatically, lifting one arm around Harry's shoulders. He realized his hand was shaking. He finally broke free, panting a little, and said, "Talk." And now his voice shook. He couldn't recall Harry ever kissing like that, like it wasn't a chore or a means to relax but something he really wanted, perhaps even needed.

Harry laughed. And even the laughter was different. Draco told himself it couldn't be and he was imagining things, but the laughter sounded in his ears as defiantly different, no matter what he thought.

And now he was repeating himself, if only in his head. He fixed his eyes sternly on Harry's face and waited.

"I was a hypocrite to Connor today," said Harry, sitting on the edge of the bed and swinging his legs. Draco's puzzlement increased. He couldn't recall Harry making many excess movements, either, or at least not out of joy. They usually expressed worry or fury or fear. "I snapped at him when I should have known how to hold my tongue, since he'd just had a traumatic experience—"

Draco snorted.

Harry eyed him. "Rosier kidnapped him and tried to kill him."

"Well, perhaps I can concede it was traumatic, then," said Draco, and inclined his head an inch. "But I'm more interested in the impact this experience had on you, Harry, thanks."

"So I snapped, and I shouldn't have," Harry continued, this time crossing his legs and bouncing the right up and down on the left. "I went to Joseph, to ask if some barrier had broken that I didn't know about. He laughed at me, then told me it was normal, and everyone is a hypocrite sometimes. And—well, it was like the tide of the lessons that everyone has been trying to teach me broke over me all at once. I realized that I can live, and that I can be normal, and that I can make mistakes and not lacerate myself over them, because everyone makes them. I realize that I wanted to live, really." Harry tapped his left wrist. "And I realized, after I went and finally forgave Snape for bringing my parents to trial, that I wanted to break the last of the curses on my wrist. So we did, Argutus and I." He gestured to the end of the bed. Following his gaze, Draco saw the Omen snake asleep on top of Harry's trunk.

"So, Draco, what do you think?"

He turned back around to see Harry sitting eagerly forward, eyes fixed on his face.

Wanting his approval. Demanding it, where before he might have hinted at best, or sat there with his eyes meekly downcast and accepted whatever criticisms Draco wanted to make.

Draco reached forward gently, and cradled Harry's cheek in his hand. Harry grinned a bit.

"You can touch me more firmly than that," he said. "I won't break."

Draco shook his head, not sure how he could convey what he wanted to say—"I know" would sound inane—and then kissed Harry thoroughly, persistently, deeply. Harry leaned back and moaned, opening himself to it, more trusting and with more barriers lowered than Draco had ever seen him give. Tears stung his eyes, but he was already putting them aside, especially when images of snakes and cats began to waltz around Harry.

They had at least an hour before anyone else required their presence. And there was only one way Draco knew to make Harry really understand what this change meant to him.

He climbed onto the bed and drew the curtains closed around them, shutting out the worry, shutting in the joy.

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Connor leaned around Hermione and stared at Harry again. Harry and Draco had just come out of NEWT Potions and were debating whatever Snape had had them brew today. Draco was grinning like a fool, so much so that it interfered with his side of the debate. Harry made wider gestures with his arms than Connor had ever seen him make, and slammed his fist into Draco's shoulder when he apparently said something particularly inane. Connor shook his head in wonder. Something's different with Harry, but I don't know what it is.

“Hermione?”

She glanced up from her Potions book. Connor and Ron had waited to collect her before they went to lunch, but Hermione didn't seem as concerned about eating or walking down the hall as trying to improve a performance that was no doubt already perfect. "Hmmm?"

"What's—I mean, does Harry look different to you?"

Hermione turned around and gave a critical glance back down the hall. Then she shrugged. "Oh, that. He's happy, that's all." She added something about "powdered bicorn horn" and went back to frowning at the text. "It doesn't say to stir counterclockwise on that potion," she muttered. "How did Harry know how to do that? I hope Professor Snape hasn't been giving him extra lessons simply to make him better, when he doesn't need any help. That would be unfair."

Ron snorted and straightened up from the wall. "This is Snape, Hermione. When has he ever been anything but unfair?"

Connor couldn't stop looking at Harry. He hadn't seen much of him yesterday, but he would have thought his little adventure on Saturday would still weigh heavily on his brother's shoulders. And now—

"Did he say why he's happy, Hermione?" he asked.

"Something about learning things," said Hermione, and then stuck her nose pointedly in the book and headed down the corridor towards the Great Hall, avoiding bags and feet by means of specially-trained Hermione senses. Ron followed her, leaving Connor to hover indecisively. He wanted to ask his brother, but he wasn't sure that Harry wouldn't resent him interrupting the debate.

Harry caught sight of him just then, though, and waved him over. Connor trotted slowly nearer. Draco frowned and put a hand on his wand, but it was Harry's wide smile that made him wariest.

"Sorry I didn't tell you yesterday, Connor," Harry said, not sounding all that apologetic. "But I was busy writing letters. The situation with the monitoring board is ridiculous. We're meeting this Saturday and that's that." He shrugged. "I'm better, though. I decided to forgive Snape and break the last curse on my left wrist, and the moment I can

decide on which kind of artificial hand I like best, I'll be getting one and learning how to use it. I'll want to Transfigure it into flesh eventually."

Connor just stared.

He had never known his brother this happy, this fully human. Whatever had happened had slammed down barriers Connor would have said would never fall, if someone had asked him on Saturday.

"Connor?"

Harry had waved his hand in front of Connor's face, looking concerned. Draco was leaning on his shoulder the way he had the first morning after they shagged, his eyes just daring Connor to say something stupid. Connor shook his head and snapped out of his spell. Whatever had changed, he was, of course, happy for Harry. And he wondered if Draco realized yet that more and more people would find this changed Harry attractive, and possibly make offers for him. The courting ritual wasn't irreversibly binding until Halloween of this year, if Connor understood correctly.

"Congratulations, Harry," he said, and held out his hand. Harry shook it, then pulled him into a hug. Connor was near enough to hear Draco growl softly. He rolled his eyes and deliberately held onto Harry a little longer than he normally would. After all, now he knew it wouldn't make his brother uncomfortable, and Draco could stand to learn that sometimes Harry wanted to hug other people.

"Thanks," said Harry as he let go. Then he smiled. "Oh, and Connor?"

Turning away to catch up with Ron and Hermione, Connor paused. "Yeah?"

"I found that ward you put on Draco and me to warn you whenever we're doing more than kissing," said Harry, voice still pleasant. "If you ever do something like that again, then the ward will make sure you get images of what we're doing instead. Full-color images that won't go away no matter what you do."

Connor shuddered, while Draco laughed. It was one thing to know that his brother had a sex life, Connor thought. It was another to know that he was willing to discuss it, and it was another thing altogether to see it, especially when it involved a Malfoy.

Maybe Draco isn't the only one who has to get used to a changed Harry.

“Uh, I’ll remember that.”

Harry nodded serenely at him and walked towards the Great Hall. Draco followed him. He must have thought they were at an angle where Connor couldn't see them, because, for a moment, he had the soppiest expression on his face. Connor would have said, if forced to describe it, that he'd fallen more deeply in love with Harry just over the course of the last few moments.

Damn Parvati for making me see things like that, Connor thought, and gave himself a clout on the ear to, hopefully, forget it, and went on to lunch.

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Owen shut the door of the classroom slowly behind him. He had received a message from his brother, a brief warble of phoenix song followed by an equally brief five words, asking him to meet Michael here, in this small room they'd adopted as their private place. It was little more than a broom closet, but it worked, especially because they weren't in the same House and Owen spent so much time apart from his brother since he'd chosen to remain Harry's sworn companion.

He had expected many things when he came here, including the rage or regret Michael usually expressed, or demands for gossip about Draco. Owen always refused to provide the last, but that didn't stop his twin from asking.

He had not expected tears.

He cast Lumos, since the room had no windows. Michael sat with his head bowed in his folded arms on one of the desks, trying not to cry and miserably failing. His sobs were quiet, though. If Owen hadn't heard his brother sob before, he didn't know that he would have recognized the sounds.

He moved up behind Michael and rubbed his arm. Michael continued to cry without acknowledging him for a moment, then turned with startling violence and embraced Owen. Owen curved his own arm around his brother's shoulders, and they stood like that.

Then Michael broke away from him, stood up, and intoned a curse Owen hadn't heard him use since their fifth year at Durmstrang. The desk disintegrated, floating down into a pile of dust and sand.

Michael aimed his wand at three more desks and did the same thing. And then he stood there, flushed, and panting, and tearful, and obviously hating the fact that he couldn't hide his tears any more.

"Are you quite done?" Owen asked.

"It's hopeless, isn't it?" Michael asked dully, and slumped to the floor. "I saw them today. Draco's never going to leave him, is he? When the vates changed, for whatever reason, he bound Draco to him for good."

It disturbed Owen that Michael would only call Harry vates and not by his name, but at least he could discuss him at all; when Harry had first released Michael from his oath, he would only say him in a tone of spitting contempt. Owen sat down beside his brother. "I think it was hopeless even before that," he said, and rolled his eyes when Michael glared at him. "Well, I do. You know my opinion. If our roles were different, if you had known Draco before last year, if Harry wasn't the kind of political leader he is—if, if, if. The point is, by the time you met Draco, it was clear what their roles were, and what one you were going to choose. You really shouldn't have sworn to Harry if you knew that you couldn't control yourself around Draco."

"You're only this sensible because you've never been in love," said Michael sullenly, and buried his head in his arms.

"Maybe I am," said Owen. "It doesn't change the fact that you took on a certain set of responsibilities and then betrayed those responsibilities." His voice grew stern in spite of his resolve to remain sympathetic. "You were a sworn companion, Michael. And like I said, you shouldn't have taken up those duties in the first place if—"

"Yes, I've heard this from you, a hundred times." Michael stood up and paced restlessly around the room, pausing to kick viciously at a desk that still existed. Then he spun around and stared intently at Owen. "Tell me this. What do you think of Draco now?"

Owen sat back, half-lidded his eyes, and thought about that. He hadn't thought much of Draco at first. He was important to Harry and had an accepted role in his life, and it wasn't Owen's place to speak badly about him, or offer his opinion at all unless it was asked for. Of course, he had his opinion, and that was that Draco sometimes displayed flashes of blinding power and insight, but was far more likely to display flashes of blinding stupidity, and needed Harry much more than Harry needed him.

In the past few days, watching them wheel around each other like a pair of dragons in springtime, Owen had revised that opinion, but he hadn't put words to it until now.

"They need each other," he said quietly. "They rely on each other in ways beyond the obvious. And sometimes I can see that strength in Draco that I was missing before, when he casts a spell in NEWT Defense Against the Dark Arts, or looks at Harry and thinks no one is watching. He hasn't learned that you can be quiet and still be strong, yet, I think. He's inclined to blare it, but that kind of blaring usually contains arrogance and conceals no strength at all. Now he's starting to shine in the quiet moments, too. Strong and loud at the same time. He's learning. Slowly, but learning."

"And now you think—"

"I think I can see why you claim you're in love with him, yes." Owen looked up at Michael. "I still think you were stupid to do what you did."

Surprisingly, his brother ignored the statement Owen thought he would take offense to and latched onto the other. "Claim I'm in love with him?" His face flushed, and he bit his lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

Owen let out a small breath, his eyes locked on Michael's. "It's not the kind of love Mother had for Father, or he for her," he said. "It's not the kind of love Harry and Draco have. You want someone to shelter, Michael. I can understand that. But Draco isn't someone who would be content to shelter behind you. He wants to fight beside his lover in battle. This is the first time I've thought he might actually be able to do it, mind."

“And that means that I’m in love with—what?” Michael laughed sardonically. “The reflection of the vates I see in Draco?”

“An illusion.”

Michael stared at him for long moments, and then turned and slammed out of the room. Owen winced a bit as the door crashed behind his brother, but he had no intention of retracting what he'd said.

Sometimes he wished he could be kinder, softer, more prone to sympathetic words of the kind that their mother had shared with their father. But he had too much of Charles in him, and Michael had too much of Medusa. And Michael was not head of the Rosier-Henlin family, and did not have to think about the consequences of what he said and did in the same framework.

He had chosen to be a sworn companion, though, with all the glories such a thing implied.

He could not complain because the costs of the glories were more than he would wish to bear.

Owen stood, gently snuffed out the Lumos, and left.

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Henrietta did not dance out of the classroom, but that was only because it would be undignified for a professor to dance.

When she got back to her private rooms, she did cast a spell that Transfigured the walls into billowing cloth, like the sides of a tent. Then she had to cast stabilizing spells to make sure Hogwarts didn't collapse around her, but that didn't matter. She had also conjured tea and biscuits, biscuits of a kind she didn't often eat any more, biscuits like her mother had made for her long ago. One crunch, and the chocolate filled her mouth and bubbled around, nearly dripping down her chin. Henrietta closed her eyes and moaned softly. It always did taste better this way, when made with a witch's magic, then when prepared by the hands of house elves. Harry was right about that.

Harry. Harry. Harry.

Henrietta gave into temptation and sang a small song. There was no one around to hear her, since she had silencing spells in place on her quarters already. That way, no students could hear her cursing them when she marked up their essays and found out that they were making the most elementary mistakes with Transfiguration. She had learned things very fast, why couldn't they learn them very fast?

The history song was an old one, about sworn companions accompanying one of the ancient Lords who had actually given a damn about them down a long, dark trail. That had been the Lord Gyrfalcon, who had wanted to destroy Death itself. He had been a corrupted necromancer, not keeping his vows, but he had kept faith with those who followed him. There had been seven of them in the end, Lord Gyrfalcon, his lover Lord Julian Parkinson, and five sworn companions who would not turn back and would never slow down.

Henrietta only got through one verse before she broke into laughter, though, and then cast soap bubbles out of her wand and twisted them into interesting shapes. She took another bite of chocolate biscuit and licked hastily to keep the chocolate where it belonged, inside her mouth, making things sweet.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if the chocolate did drip down, though, she thought, unless a student came to her door and saw her like that.

She could stand to lose a bit of the taste. The whole world was sweet, right now.

Harry had changed, and had become what Henrietta had always known he could be—someone who had all the virtues of the ancient Lords without having to Declare.

She leaned back, folded her hands behind her head, and hummed another snatch of the history song. She had watched Harry all week, and there was no doubt that he paid more attention to people around him now and less to his fear of hurting them. And his magic! He had worked Transfigurations that surprised him, but not Henrietta. Lord-level magic took some strange paths to get where it needed to go, and there were a few barriers that could be broken by sheer strength. Harry couldn't break them while he held himself back and restrained his power for reasons Henrietta couldn't understand, but let his magic fly and he had a sudden violent improvement.

He hadn't yet seen his Animagus form, though, he confessed to her. Henrietta was not worried about that. It would come in time.

Harry would survive this war. That was partially because of the change. Now Henrietta had more faith that he would eliminate his enemies before they could do him harm.

But it was also because, if she had had any doubts remaining about Harry, they had just been sealed off. She was his, loyal and close and collared like a running hound. And she was happy to be so.

She wondered if anyone she passed in the halls daily knew that only her love for Harry held her back from cursing them all. She was still a Dark witch. She still had all the contempt for Light wizards that she ever had. She had learned a grudging respect for some of them, especially Headmistress McGonagall.

But if Harry ever asked her to kill McGonagall, Henrietta would not hesitate.

It was very simple, really. There was the rest of the world which was loyal to Harry, Henrietta's comrades. And there was the rest of the

world which was not, and would have to go through her to get to him. And if Harry wanted that part of the world dead or maimed or tortured, he had only to ask.

Henrietta smiled at the ceiling. It was not her fault if none of them saw that. They should have paid more attention to the history songs—the ones about the only way dragons had ever agreed to serve wizards, the ones about the courtship of Lord Julian and Lord Gyrfalcon (and what a terror they had been, two Dark Lords united in power and in purpose), the ones about the sworn companions who had stayed and fought for a Lord or Lady instead of running.

Love bound her, love made her tame, and within its chain she was free.

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Aurora was waiting.

She had not liked the peremptory tone of Harry's latest letter, the one demanding that they meet in the Ministry that Saturday, or he would know why. It was not like Harry to demand at all. Aurora worried about what it might have cost him, or who might have put him up to it.

But the monitoring board had come, and a few of the Dark wizards had filed in looking excited, as if they had secrets. Aurora had pegged them at once. Harry might have insured that Griselda, and not Aurora, had power over the board itself, but he could not deprive her of her eyes. They were likely candidates for the ones who had put him up to this.

Narcissa Malfoy, in particular. She moved as if treading on a burning cloud, her eyes too bright and her head so high it was a wonder she didn't bang her nose on the ceiling. And she sat down on her side of the table and looked directly at Aurora with a smile she'd never shown before. That made Aurora immediately wary.

And then the door opened, and Harry came in, walking between Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape as if he had not a care in the world.

Aurora half-stood. Now she knew something had happened. Some of the shadows had vanished from Harry's face, and he wasn't cringing in any way or form. He looked at everyone else in the room before her, in fact, nodding to his Dark allies and not bothering to do more than look courteous to the Light wizards. He looked less than that when his eyes passed over Marvin and Shadow.

Then his gaze focused on her.

And he looked at her as if she were a respected enemy.

Aurora squashed her impulse to say something. She inclined her head to Harry instead, and sat back down. Harry took his seat across from Griselda, not releasing her eyes, and used his magic to widen the two chairs next to him, so that Snape and Malfoy could sit down. Aurora had made sure the chairs were a bit narrower than usual on purpose, to see what his reaction would be.

He was responding like a Lord, that was what he was responding like.

Aurora bit her lip in vexation and sat still, her heart pounding hard. At least she knew that Lisa Addlington and Shadow would somewhat curb themselves this time, and talk more softly. That would make the points she hoped to score with Harry easier. If she could show that her influence on them could be wielded for his good as well as his detriment, Harry would be more likely to trust her.

But Harry didn't let Griselda speak, though that had been the procedure at their last meeting. He spoke instead, and his voice was firm, respectful, quiet, and utterly unlike anything he had used before.

"I've decided that the monitoring board should meet on a regular schedule," he said. "Every other Saturday is reasonable, I think. That allows me time to complete my schoolwork, and means I am not leaving Hogwarts at some unreasonable hour of the day. My education is important to me, of course, as an underage wizard." That was said so blandly that Aurora didn't note the sarcasm until a few moments later. "And I would also like other Light wizards on the board."

"We agreed to these," said Aurora, speaking before she thought.

"Oh, I know," said Harry, his eyes, which had turned to look at others, swinging back to meet hers. "But I have come to realize it's not a good idea to let my enemies have control of me, Mrs. Whitestag. And that was what I did, under some misguided idea that my enemies could hate me and yet offer me rational advice."

"None of us hate you, vates," said Lisa, earnestly.

Harry snorted. "I don't think 'dislike' and 'want to control my actions and strip me of my family' is really all that different from hatred, Mrs. Addlington," he said. "I do have Light allies who would like a place on the monitoring board, yet would hold firm to their allegiance. Laura Gloryflower, for example. A few of the Griffinsnest family. Paton Opalline. I did not ask them before because I felt that I could not have them with me." Harry laughed, a small, chilly sound. "Does that make good political sense? Of course not. They are my allies. I owe them more than that."

"And what about keeping a balance of different kinds of wizards on the board, Harry?" Aurora asked. They were losing him. The dragon had woken and snapped the reins, and he would fly if they weren't careful. "We need halfblood and Muggleborn members, and I have never heard of your having any close Muggleborn and halfblood allies."

Harry smiled charmingly. "I am halfblood myself, Mrs. Whitestag," he said. "I think that should count for something. And some of the Opallines are adopted Muggleborns, or halfbloods. They are an enormous family. I'm sure Paton would be happy to send me some of his relatives who fit those requirements if I asked."

"I don't think you know what you're doing, Harry," Aurora said gently, while behind her the others rustled and buzzed in a panic. "You need these members on the monitoring board to reassure your Light allies."

"I can offer them my word and my behavior," said Harry. "If they aren't reassured by that, they won't be my allies, anyway." He looked bored now. "I am reorganizing the board, Mrs. Whitestag. So far, it's been

almost nonsensical. When we met, you imposed restrictions on me that no rational person would have agreed to, including that I come here without my guardian. Our meetings are irregular, delayed by bickering that doesn't suit the adults I thought we were. Or almost-adult, in my case." Harry smiled like a shark. "I'll be of age in less than seven months, Mrs. Whitestag. You only have until then to supervise me. To make it count, you should accept the regular meetings with half Light and half Dark wizards as the best compromise I'm willing to make."

Aurora stared around the table. The Dark wizards looked smug. It was obvious they'd all known about this. The goblins looked on the verge of laughter, as much as Aurora could read their ugly faces. The centaur, Bone, stamped his hoof slowly, his gaze fixed on Harry and filled with approval. Griselda seemed to be watching a sunrise. And none of her allies were ready to help her, because they were caught too off-balance by the winds of this hurricane.

Aurora took a deep breath, and turned slowly back to Harry. Whatever had awakened him, she would find and eliminate it if she could, but to have the chance to do that, she needed to stay close to Harry. And she was the most important Light member of the board, ultimately, since she was the leader. She was the one who could persuade the others to accept conditions they might hate. She was the organizer. She would not object too much, lest she be cast off the monitoring board.

"You are right, vates," she said, catching Harry's eye. "The monitoring board has not so far performed its designated purpose. If you think it needs reorganization in order to do so, that is what will happen."

She ignored the clucking and squawking from her allies, staring at Harry, willing him to accept this.

Harry gave her a lazy, self-satisfied smile that said he knew what she was doing, and appreciated it, damn him.

Someone put the notion of his own power into his head.

And from that, her course was clear—at least her goal, if not the way she would need to tread to get there.

Somehow, I must get it out again.

Chapter Sixty-One: A Different Kind of Birthing Bed

"I don't know if the Daily Prophet will publish it," said Harry. It was all he could say, after he had finished reading Hermione's letter about house elves. It stunned him and moved him and made him feel as if he had been neglecting the magical creatures who might have suffered most under their webs and their direct subjugation to wizards. His hand shook as he lowered the paper to the table.

"Oh, I thought they wouldn't," said Hermione calmly. She sat on the other side of the table, with books from at least six different parts of the Library spread out around her. There was one about Dark magic, two on fantastic beasts, one on old Ministry laws, and three Harry hadn't had the chance to read the titles of, but was sure were all different. "I was thinking of sending letters directly to the owners of the house elves themselves. A letter-writing campaign. And letters could go to the Quibbler and the Vox Populi, of course."

"Especially the latter," Harry had to add. Dionysus Hornblower had not made up his mind if Harry was an evil traitor or a kind liberator yet this week, but he would pounce gleefully on the issue of house elves no matter which way his judgment fell. Harry studied Hermione's letter once more, then glanced up at her. "I'm humbled that you've cared about this so much, when I haven't paid that much attention to it," he murmured.

Hermione shook her head. "Why shouldn't I care about it? The more I look at house elves under their web, the more I think that some of the ways wizards treat house elves apply to how they treat people like me, too. We don't suffer as much, but there's a sense that our magic is just—there. House elves can do wonderful things, and most people don't bother to wonder about that, or to think why magical creatures who can perform such marvels without wands would ever have agreed to serve them. And they don't want to think about how magic sought us out, either, if it's only supposed to concentrate in pureblood lines. And the fact that we can make our way into the wizarding world successfully when we didn't even know it was there for the first eleven years of our lives is overlooked, too." Hermione's face took on a look of exultant rapture. "I'm thinking of writing a book studying the way that Muggleborn children grow used to the wizarding world, you

know. It's not ever been studied. There are a few books that are supposed to help us adapt, but they're full of nonsense."

"If anyone can do it, it's you, Hermione," Harry said, and felt one more shimmer of awe run through him, joined by a frisson of happiness. At least he knew that other people were adopting his cause as their own, even if he didn't pay enough attention to them. It made him want to go and do wonderful things to help inspire still others. "I'll get started on writing my own letters."

"Good." Hermione pushed a long scroll across the table towards him. Harry unrolled it with both hand and Levitation Charm, and glanced at it curiously. It seemed to be a list of names.

"House elf owners," Hermione explained without looking up; she was already looking at a book that had Arts somewhere in the title. "The ones who don't have any connection to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow yet, and aren't your enemies, either. The neutrals we need to convince."

Harry smiled. "Thanks, Hermione." As he stood, he caught sight of Zacharias Smith hovering near the shelves. Harry wondered if he should scowl or give him an encouraging look. He didn't know the current state of things in the intellectual war between Zacharias and Hermione. He thought they were talking to one another again, but Zacharias still found small points to argue about, ignoring the larger issues that Hermione wanted to raise with him.

In the end, Harry settled for nodding to him and hurrying out of the library with his list of names. He would make plans for writing letters for an hour each day, and sending Hedwig and other school owls out with them in the evening. That wouldn't take much more time than his studying of Horcruxes did.

It had been more than a week now since he'd discovered that he could matter as much as the next person, and he could feel the insight slipping away from him, sometimes. There were moments he wanted to go back to the way he had been, flinging himself into obsessions without pausing to consider what might be the better course. And he had snapped at Draco sometimes, and been

inconsiderate when Connor asked him for help on Transfiguration homework, so he was definitely no longer as good at balancing his needs and the needs of the world as he had been.

But the point was not to cling to the insight. The point was to live it, and there were ways that focusing on the house elves might help him do that.

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It was a few days after he'd started posting the letters that Padma approached him at breakfast with a very strange expression on her face. Harry swallowed his scrambled eggs—he'd finally figured out what shops in Hogsmeade could be trusted to cast the proper warming charms, and that made his meals considerably more pleasant—and cocked his head at her.

“Did you send my parents a letter about their house elves?” Padma asked without preamble.

Harry frowned for a moment, considering the mental list of names, then shook his head. "That was Hermione," he said. "Why? Is something wrong?" He couldn't imagine Hermione being less than polite, and the Patils were Light wizards well-disposed towards Muggleborns, so they wouldn't take it as an insult to get post from one of them. He hoped.

"She sent this," said Padma, and held it out.

Harry considered the sheet of parchment. Hermione had talked to him about them, but he hadn't seen one so far. It was a list of "Eleven Facts You Might Not Know About House Elves," and the logo above it, which picked out Elvish Liberation Front in elegant letters, marched across a shield which a scowling house elf gripped.

The facts were true, as far as Harry could see, including Number Four, which asked if the reader knew that warming charms were actually faster than similar house elf magic, though sometimes they didn't heat bread and drinks as thoroughly. He handed the list back to Padma. "What's wrong? Did it make your parents uncomfortable?"

“Well.” Padma shifted her weight. “They wanted to know how much you supported this. How much the Elvish Liberation Front was Hermione’s idea and how much it was yours.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, I support it, of course. But the main idea was Hermione’s, and the main bulk of the work has been Hermione’s.” He looked around Padma with a smile, to where Hermione was holding forth about E.L.F. in the middle of the Gryffindor table. Ron looked bored, but Connor was listening, though with the reluctant expression on his face that Harry knew to be his brother’s way of trying not to let what he heard affect him. Harry looked back at Padma. “I am sorry for any discomfort your parents are experiencing. Hermione chose owners of house elves who weren’t already in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, not people whose children attended Hogwarts. If your parents are uncomfortable hearing about the Elvish Liberation Front, I’ll ask her if she’ll refrain from sending them post.”

“But you won’t make her stop.” Padma had her lip between her teeth and was worrying it.

“No.” Harry drank his pumpkin juice to hide his smile. This was exactly what he had hoped would happen when he first started thinking about freeing the magical creatures. The Centaur Committee and the Goblin Board of the Ministry were good starts, too, in a way, but Harry’s rebellion had forced them both to happen. He wanted to see other witches and wizards growing passionate about the differences in equality between magical species without prompting. It would probably take the will and intelligence of a Hermione to found each organization, though. “I can’t. E.L.F.’s not mine, but I do think what she’s doing is great.”

Padma blinked, a bit. “All right,” she said slowly. “Only, I think the letters annoyed my mother.”

Harry shrugged. “Hermione’s goal isn’t to annoy people.” At least, that’s not her primary goal. Anyone who merely found the reminder that house elves were enslaved annoying would be annoyed, and irritated, and worried at. “Like I said, I’ll ask if she’ll leave your parents

off the next round of post she sends, but I don't think she'll agree to it."

Padma left with a faintly puzzled expression on her face, as if she thought that could have gone better but wasn't sure how. Harry turned around when someone tapped him on the shoulder, and found himself face-to-face with Draco.

"Are you going to send post to my father?" Draco's voice was casual, but he hadn't yet learned how to control the set of his shoulders, and Harry knew he was tense.

Harry shook his head. "He was in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. He knows all about house elves. And I don't want to seem as though I'm acknowledging him." Lucius Malfoy kept sending Harry letters which recommended courses of action Harry wasn't comfortable with, including listening to Lucius's side of the story. So far as Harry could tell, Lucius's side of the story had a great deal of misplaced pride and unconvincing attempts to grovel.

Draco half-closed his eyes, and then said, "And what about me? Would you like it if I stopped eating meals house elves had cooked? If I cleaned my clothes instead of letting them do it?"

"Yes."

Draco's head snapped back as though he were preparing to be offended. Harry raised an eyebrow at him. "You said, would I like it if you did? Yes, I would. I didn't mean I would badger you into doing it." He turned back to his eggs, and tried to conceal his laughter. He wondered when Draco would notice that, in fact, Harry had been casting the charms to clean his robes, and not house elves at all; Harry regularly used a spell that cleaned all the cloth in the room.

The next time he remarks on how much more convenient house elves are than charms, I'll tell him, Harry decided.

Draco was looking at a forkful of sausages as though he didn't enjoy contemplating the source of his food. He stuffed them into his mouth

when he saw Harry looking and made exaggerated sounds of pleasure.

Harry shrugged and ate some more. Perhaps he and Draco would have an argument when he found out about the cleaning charms, if only because Draco would be angry at being duped. But Harry had to admit that he was looking forward to it. If he no longer lived in his careful little world where his main purpose was not offending others, then he had to accept the bumps and bruises that would come with that.

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Harry opened his eyes, and blinked. He stood in the middle of a snowy field, with flat, silvery grass stretching in every direction about him, and shadows from the moon carving deep lines into the silver. He turned slowly around, lifting his head now and then, trying to see more than moon and stars and snow and drifting clouds. It was difficult.

I haven't had a dream this vivid in a while. I wonder what will happen next? Harry braced himself for an attack by Falco or Voldemort.

“Harry.”

That voice rang bells along his skin. Harry turned in the direction it came—from behind him, but he suspected it would have been from behind him no matter which way he faced when it first spoke—and took some time to recognize the creature who poured towards him. It was a heat shimmer of green and gold, like rippling leaves marked with sunlight and tossed by wind. But the enormous eyes that stared out of it, green and gold as well, he remembered.

“Dobby,” he murmured, feeling a bit ridiculous in addressing a creature who was so far beyond his enslaved self by that house elf name.

The green eyes widened in what Harry thought was an expression of pleasure, though. "I need to hear it," he said, as if reading Harry's thoughts. "To remind myself of what has been, of what still is, and of

what will be for others of my kind. I am roaming in other times now, and the past is easiest to forget.” The eyes pinned Harry with sudden intensity. “I see that you are at last beginning to move on helping other house elves, as wizards choose to call us.”

“Yes,” said Harry quietly. He didn’t think he could say anything else, or in any other tone, confronted by the enormous shapeshifter that wizards had caged and trapped in one form for so long—surely as great a sin, chaining something that mutable, as the work they made the house elves do for them. Harry himself had benefited from that work, and had Dobby’s help before he freed him. The debt he owed, as a wizard, was so great that Harry didn’t think he could pay it back by acting as vates. He would have to do what he could and hope it made a dent.

“You have waited.”

“I have,” said Harry simply, and guilt coiled in him like a whip. He took a deep breath and did his best to ride it. There was simply not enough time in the world to feel guilty for everything, but for this, he owed more than most. He had put off attending to house elves and their needs, even when he promised Dobby that he would think more about that.

It would have been easy to make excuses, to say that the werewolf problem had been more pressing, made so by Loki’s actions, and that, when he had enough magic to replace the linchpins in the northern goblins’ web, of course he had had to do so. But the fact remained that he had given a promise and broken it.

Dobby studied him with those enormous eyes, mirrors of a sun Harry had never seen, for a moment more, and then formed and held out a hand. “I’ve brought you into the midst of dreams to show you a chance that might help you make up for your mistakes,” he said. “Death and life mingle in the air tonight, as they cross whenever one of us is born.”

“Born?” Harry asked, even as he clasped the hand with his own. For a moment, just a moment, the skin under his own felt like the familiar, rubbery flesh of a house elf. Then it seemed to melt and change.

Harry grasped after it, not understanding, until he saw his own body falling like rain.

“Yes,” said Dobby. “One of my kind is born tonight, born into slavery. But there is a chance that we may free him, and his mother, without violating anyone’s will, for death also lurks close tonight.” He paused, and Harry tried not to yell as he felt his arms shred from his shoulders into rain, into light, into sound. “The birthing bed is far away, so we travel as music.”

Harry thought about closing his eyes, but by then, he didn’t have eyes to close anymore. He was a spasm of sound, of packed thought, of song that he could not hear because it was himself.

He could hear Dobby’s song, though, changing chords and monstrous shifting tones, and as they flew through star-scattered darkness, with Dobby’s music drawing him along in its wake like a dragon hatchling by its mother’s side, Harry shivered with awe. The music extended further and wider and wilder than he had ever known. How had the ancient wizards even dared to think that creatures with souls like this should serve them? How had they dared to ask?

Of course, they didn’t ask. They just enslaved, and then made both themselves and the house elves forget about the origin of the slavery. It’s easier to live with if you don’t have your guilt staring you in the face, after all.

They turned through whirling darkness and whirling symphonies, and finally settled into place in a dim room. Harry stared around. Nothing seemed familiar, though he could make out white walls that resembled those of some rooms at Malfoy Manor. But it was the sight in front of him that captured his attention—and was supposed to, he reminded himself sharply.

A female house elf lay gasping in a crude bed of cotton and rags. Other house elves surrounded her, moaning, their large hands moving over her forehead in trembling tenderness. Harry could see the blood soaking the rags around her, flowing from between her legs. He looked at Dobby, who had manifested as a green-golden shimmer

at his side again, but seemed invisible to anyone in the room. His great eyes were fixed on the birthing bed.

“This is the moment when life and death cross,” he murmured, sounding like a catechism. “Every life we bring into the world involves danger for the mother. Every life we give to Life is one that we may also give to Death.” He detached a small slice of himself from the rest of his body, and Harry had the impression of a finger lifting to touch his lips. “Do you feel it, Harry? Do you feel her?”

Harry thought he meant the female house elf, and reached out obediently. But, perhaps because he was still transformed into music, his magic couldn’t connect with the mother’s suffering.

He started to say no, and then noticed the shadow in one corner of the room. It was an elegant black dog, smaller and slimmer than the one that followed Regulus, but in all other ways similar. The pointed muzzle aimed at the birthing bed. The eyes were glittering dark pits. Harry shivered. He had never seen Death before, and if someone had asked him to imagine her, he would not have imagined something so patient, so cool, such a poised hunter.

“This is the moment when life and death cross,” Dobby said again. “And this is the moment when we may do what I will ask you to do without violating anyone’s will, because the owner has resigned his claim to the mother. He believes she will die, and the babe with her. Will you save them, Harry?”

Harry glanced again at the black dog. “And she won’t have something to say about it?”

“She is only one of the forces in this room,” Dobby pointed out. “Life may yet win. She cannot prevent that from happening.”

Harry vibrated slowly, which he thought meant a nod right now. “And if I put myself into the contest, then I’m struggling against her?” He could remember what that kind of struggle had cost Voldemort, and he was not sure that he wanted to enter it himself. He didn’t understand house elf magic at all. More than that, he did not want to

end up with the kind of thirst for immortality that struggling against death seemed to imply.

“Only as healers do,” Dobby said softly. “As all life does, as the mother and her babe are doing even now. I ask you to struggle against death, and I ask you to cut the webs for this pair of house elves as you do so. Is that so great a sacrifice?”

Harry began to breathe more easily. And as he looked at the black dog, almost the image of the one Regulus carried on his arm and at his heels, it was much easier to think of Death as the cruel bitch—literally, in this case. She was a shadow, a powerful shadow, but not one he had to give in to. And if it came down to a contest between life and death, Harry knew which side he was on.

“Very well,” he said softly. “But won’t the other elves attack me when they see I’m there?”

“I will explain to them,” Dobby said, and then Harry melted out of music and back into his bodily form.

He bent over the laboring house elf, while around him he heard a chorus of gasps and squeaks. Gently, he pulled the rags aside, and caught a glimpse of the baby’s head, smaller and rounder and greener than the head of the only other newborn he’d been this close to, Millicent’s sister Marian.

The mother’s hand found and gripped his. Harry looked up and met her enormous eyes, gleaming like lamps in the dimness.

“Save Jiv’s baby,” she whispered. “I is too weak to make it.”

Harry returned her fierce clasp without answering, and then looked back at the baby. The head was in the wrong position, he thought; that was at least part of the reason the mother had lost so much blood. He didn’t dare touch it with his hand, and not only because he thought his wrist would be mashed to a pulp before the mother, Jiv, was done with it. He simply didn’t know what he might break, what clumsiness he might perpetrate with his fingers.

He let his barriers down, and called fully on his magic. It came and flooded around him, and Harry shaped it with his will, instead of a spell. He knew of no spell that would do what he wanted, though a midwife probably would.

Arrange the baby so he can come free. Patch her wounds so that she can live while I work on the web.

He felt his magic flow forward around him, thick as a tide of blood, as determined and as patient. It met a force as determined and as patient. Harry looked up at the black dog in the corner of the room, and found her dark eyes focused on him, seeing him. He let out a slow breath, and told himself that Death saw everyone, all the time. She gave her personal notice to few. Even Regulus had had to work for it.

She will not make me die any faster, Harry reassured himself. There are other lives at stake here. He looked down at the bloody, torn green flesh, one more time, and then set his magic free to do as it needed to. Trails of glimmering, pale light, like spiderwebs fleshed in dew and sunshine, slid between Jiv's legs, and the baby cried weakly as the power urged his head gently in a different direction.

Jiv tried to sit up and see what was happening, her grip increasing on Harry's hand as she did so.

Harry waited a moment to be sure that he wouldn't just erupt in a cry of pain, then pushed her gently flat again. "Lie down," he whispered, and reached out and touched the web that bound her.

This wasn't like Dobby's half-tattered web, worked at and torn already by the work of Decus Lestrangle. This was whole, and the thick strands of the slave web under the one that confined Jiv's power and magic made Harry wince. Jiv was so convinced she was a servant, born and made only to be so, that if her master walked into the room right now, she would try to leap to her feet and ask him what he wanted.

Harry moved his fingers in Jiv's clasp, trying to stroke her palm, a reassuring, soothing motion, and heard her cry again as the baby shifted position. Her long ears flapped, and her jaw worked.

Harry focused on the web. He remembered what he had done to break Dobby's web, the double slicing, and sought for weak points.

There. There was one of them, at the foot of the web. The wizard who owned Jiv had resigned his claim to her, convinced, as Dobby said, that she would die. And Harry could use that, unraveling the web that no longer had an anchor from that point of least resistance.

He swirled down in that direction, his magic pacing and preceding him. At the same time, he could feel his magic working to let Jiv's son emerge into the world, and if he concentrated, he would suddenly see a collage of blood and muscle and skin and Death's waiting presence. He tore himself away from that, though, and back to the web.

All his power was up, and flung into the task. Harry felt fully occupied as he hadn't done since the bursting of the phoenix web.

Then he forced himself to stop thinking about it, and turned to the task.

The first coil he slit easily enough, sliding down and through the linked slave web and magic-binding web. He felt Jiv convulse, her fingers pressing on his, but the sensation grew more distant as he entered the second knot of the web.

This one towered over him, slick and glistening like a fish, the two strands twined so tightly into one another that Harry didn't see how it was meant to come undone. Of course, it had never really been meant to come undone; those ancient wizards who wove the web had not wanted house elves free. But now Harry had to climb this mountain in the moonlight, and he was going to do it.

In the end, he did it with less finesse than he would have wanted. He shaped a pair of enormous jaws, not unlike the ones he had attacked Tom Riddle with in the Chamber of Secrets so long ago, and chewed through the mountain. He felt silk gum up in his teeth and spin

through his brain, looking for a hold. Harry brought up his vates beliefs in defense against it, blazing.

The web snarled and swung away, dissipating and tattering further the further it moved. Harry hoped that meant it wouldn't be able to find a host at all, as it probably could in a wizard's mind more amenable to compulsion.

The sides of the web in front of him now led away as a helix, dancing separately from each other but crossing back together. Harry separated the jaws into two pieces, two skating figures that slid up and down and around each loop of the helix. It was important that he not lose track of which was which.

Up, down, around, upside down; his perception split and dizzied him as the figures skated, and dragged knives behind them. Harry was drawing on more magic than he had in a long time, the pull centering in his chest and his heart. It felt good, though. Now he knew he was using the magic, not merely wasting it, or locking it up and refusing to wield it, as Jing-Xi had told him rather sharply was what he had done in the past.

The web began to unravel in front of him, enough of it cut now so that its stability was compromised. Then the helix strands crossed over each other, and brought the skating figures briefly back together, and Harry gasped as he was rudely thrown into a union of all his magic, straining birth and staring Death and laboring heart and crushed fingers and unweaving tapestry.

He shook his head, and the perceptions shrank to manageable levels. He could still see his magic working to save Jiv's life if he looked, and feel his body if he wanted, but right now he was not looking and he did not want.

His perceptions sliced the last of the web, and then turned around, sensing an enemy behind them. Harry understood when he saw the net of autumn colors unfolding over Jiv's legs. The web had replicated itself, reaching for the new house elf entering the world, to make him a slave from the moment of his birth. It would not settle on him if he died, and the newness of it made its weaknesses apparent,

but Harry still could not allow it to begin to bind. Jiv's son was too fragile. The promise of freedom and the nearness of death would reach out to him at the same time as the web, asking a young brain to deal with too many factors.

Harry stretched, throwing his momentum and his magic behind him, to break the strands of red and gold and orange.

And then a mightier power swirled around him like a stream in flood around rocks, and swept past him, and ate the web. Harry gaped for a moment, then understood. Jiv's magic was free, and she no longer thought of herself as a slave. She was acting to save her son and herself.

"Get out, Harry," he heard Dobby's voice say.

Harry pulled all his magic back together with a clap that sounded in his ears like thunder, though probably less impressive than that in the real world, and gasped; it felt strange, alien, to have only one perspective now, one way of seeing things. He opened his eyes and flexed his hand, and watched as, for the first time in countless generations, a mother house elf used her magic to serve her child instead of her master.

The magic resembled Dobby's only in the shots of green and gold that Harry could see drifting through it; it was much closer to blue-green, so that he seemed to watch the scene underwater. The magic curled and claimed the young house elf, dragging him the right way around at once. Jiv knew the proportions of the baby's body as she knew her own, Harry thought, and did not need to perform the same delicate, probing work that his magic had tried.

The web flexed forward like a stingray. Jiv's magic covered and cored it, and the web exploded into scattershots of light, small darting fish that hurried away in a panic and were gone.

Then Jiv's magic swung around again, in a current, and Harry had one moment of seeing her cradling her son in her arms, her head bowed, her ears flapping in that familiar house elf way, while around her the others cheered.

In the corner, Death bowed her head, and the black dog became a shadow, became a note of music, became nothingness. Harry felt a cold touch on the back of his neck, and she was gone.

Jiv and the baby began to expand. Their dark green skin turned to blue-green, and Harry saw a rising tidal wave of magic and water and light and foam. The wave crested, turned on glittering silvery toes, and then flowed outward into the universe. Harry wondered what forms Jiv and her son could take, what they would do, and was both glad and sad that he would never know. He would have liked to see it, but some knowledge should be beyond the reach of wizards.

Dobby touched his shoulder and turned him around. Harry smiled into his eyes, which were smiling back at him.

"You are still vates," said Dobby, as if making a prophecy. "This is still what you want to do for the rest of your life."

"It is," Harry said, and then blinked. He lay in his bed, his muscles sore, aching, his arms clasped around Draco, murmuring the words into Draco's hair.

"What is?" Draco asked with a yawn, only half-awake.

"Go back to sleep," Harry whispered. "I'll explain in the morning."

Draco obeyed. Harry lay there, and grinned at the ceiling of the four-poster, and felt the exhaustion of magic used and exercised in every part of him.

I am vates. That is still the core and the heart of what I want to do with my life, the most important thing. Thank you, Dobby, for reminding me.

Chapter Sixty-Two: Wood and Bone and Blood and Iron

Draco flexed his fingers in a slow pattern that his mother had taught him the last time he visited her, to make himself calm down and think about something else. It kept him from snapping immediately at Harry, who sat with his arms folded on the other side of the bed and didn't seem to understand what he'd done wrong.

"Well, I don't see it," he said at last. "How could you free a mother and a child? House elves are valuable, and house elf children can work within a few days of being born. The owner wouldn't have given them up."

"He already had," Harry said promptly. "The webs over the house elves link to the owners' intentions, which I didn't know. He believed she would die in childbirth, and the baby with her. He'd resigned his claim to them, and that's why Dobby and I could step in and interfere." He shrugged. "It doesn't make any difference to the free will of the owner. In one sense, they would be gone from his control. Now they're simply gone from his control in another sense."

Draco braced himself. He could tell he and Harry were going to collide, and he didn't want that, just a few days before February second and the fourth courting ritual. "Harry," he said.

"Yes?"

Draco licked his lips and leaned forward. "It makes a large difference. If you had saved their lives and maintained the webs, the owner would have wanted them back, don't you think? And if he had known there was a way they could survive the night, he would have never resigned his claim to them. You lied, at least by omission, by not waking him up and telling him the truth."

There was silence for a moment. Draco, who had expected an angry outburst, was surprised. He watched Harry sit there with head bowed, and wondered if it was possible that he was actually thinking about this.

Then Harry lifted his face, and Draco recoiled a bit at the look in his eyes. He told himself to be still and not flinch, though, even when the shadow of a snake draped over Harry's shoulders. If he backed down from Harry through fear of his magic, he would never be an equal partner in their disputes. He would always have only the opinions that Harry allowed him to hold or express, and no others. He was striking a blow for his own freedom by not flinching.

That didn't stop him from wanting to yield just so that the thick flow of magic over him would turn sweet. But those instincts were only instincts, and he could control them. Draco breathed softly, his eyes fixed on Harry's face.

"I should have maintained the webs?" Harry asked softly. "Do you realize that asking me to do so violates every commitment I have as a vates, Draco?"

"I thought you already did that," said Draco. "By violating the owner's free will, I mean. He should have known, and should have made the decision to let Jiv and her son go with full knowledge of what was happening." He paused, and then flung the words. If nothing else, they might make Harry so angry as to throw him off-balance. "Or are you afraid that he'd refuse, and you'd have to abide by the respect for wizards' free will that you promised, and that means that you'd have to see that freeing house elves is wrong-headed?"

Something burst behind him. Draco thought one of the bedposts had cracked clean through. He still did not let himself back down. At the moment, his trust in Harry was a fragile thing, as likely to splinter as a bedpost was, but he still would not yield. Harry was Harry, and Harry would never hurt him.

"Freeing house elves is not wrong-headed," said Harry softly, after a long, ominous pause. "If their service was something natural, the ancient wizards would never have had to put a web on them to compel their slavery in the first place. And though I would have argued with the owner had he maintained a claim to them—I wouldn't have had a choice, because then the webs would likely have been too strong for me to cut through—I don't think that what I did this time was wrong."

“Why not?” Draco challenged him insistently. If Harry couldn’t defend his position in an argument with him, then he wouldn’t be able to defend it with political rivals. Draco was doing him a favor, really.

“Because I would have had to actively help in the enslavement of house elves,” said Harry. “I would have had to heal Jiv and her son and haul them back into their webs. You maintain that the owner would have wanted to keep them if he had known I could save their lives, and not otherwise. And why should I save their lives just so that he could keep them?”

“Because—” Draco paused.

“I already know that I’m not going to like whatever you have to say next.” Harry’s face was frozen. “Just say it, Draco.”

“Because a wizard’s will is more important than a house elf’s will,” said Draco. “Because he deserved the chance to know it. Because I still think that a wizard’s allegiance should be to his own kind, Harry, and you owed Jiv’s owner more responsibility than you showed him.”

“I see.” Harry gave him a nod, then stood and walked towards the door.

Draco couldn’t help it; he called out after him, “Where are you going?”

Harry looked back at him. “To think, Draco. That’s all.” He paused for a moment, and spoke words that he probably meant to be comforting without any softness in his face, which meant they weren’t comforting at all. “It doesn’t involve giving you the silent treatment again, or leaving you. If I did either of those things, you’d know.” He held up his hand so that the Black ring on it shone, and Draco imagined he would probably strip it off as a sign that their courting ritual was done, if he should decide to do so.

Then he shut the door of their bedroom, and shut Draco off from him for a time. Draco lay back on the bed, and thought.

At one point, he saw a glimmer of scales move past the bed, and Argutus raised his head up to look at him. The Omen snake let out a long, breathless hiss that was probably the equivalent of a scolding in Parseltongue, and then hooked himself around the handle of the door and went after Harry.

Draco scowled and rolled over to push his face into the pillow.

What had Harry expected him to say when he told him about this? He knew where Draco stood. He knew what Draco thought about Mudbloods. It was one thing to treat them politely in public, and another thing to actually think them equal to pureblood wizards. Draco didn't. Their magic could be the same. Their blood never would be, and neither would their heritage. There were dozens of things that Draco, raised in a pureblood environment, knew and accepted the way that a fish knew and accepted water. Granger would never know them. Hannah Abbott, from Hufflepuff, violated them all the time, minor rules of politeness about staring and what words one used in public. Merlin, even Harry—

And there he stopped, because if someone had asked him to judge Harry on behavior, without knowing anything about his blood, Draco knew what he would have said. He would have called him pureblood.

He rolled restlessly off the bed and pulled on a set of clean robes; the ones he wore were too rumpled for his taste now, and covered with sweat from the fear he'd briefly felt once Harry's magic spread throughout the room. As they settled around his shoulders, Draco relaxed. There was something soothing about wearing clothes cleaned with house elf magic. He would make sure to tell Harry so, the next time he saw him.

He didn't dare go in search of Harry, so he set about arranging the components he would need for the Imbolc ritual. It still wasn't for a few days yet; he had plenty of time to find them and then persuade Harry to come near enough so that the ritual could start. Perhaps, in a way, it was a good thing they were having this argument now. There was no other courting ritual that would fit angry words so well.

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Harry was still “thinking” at breakfast the next morning. Draco did make his comment about robes cleaned with house elf magic, and Harry turned and stared directly at him.

Of course, Harry then said, “I use a cleaning charm that cleans all the cloth in the room, Draco. Including your robes. House elves haven’t touched anything in our bedroom for months.” And that stole all his triumph.

Draco turned away with a helpless scowl. He ate a few bites of pancakes, took a few sips of pumpkin juice, but the savor had gone out of all of them. Then he burst out, “And what’s going to happen to families who can’t afford to give up their house elves, Harry? The ones who’ll have to buy food and cook it on their own from now on? Have you thought about that?”

Harry turned and stared at him. “Draco,” he said a moment later. “Did you really not know?”

“Know what?” Draco demanded.

“It’s something I suspected, but Hermione confirmed it,” said Harry, small puffs of breath escaping him that made him sound unattractive and impatient. Draco considered telling him so, but decided that not interrupting might be the best course of action right now. “Owners of house elves do give them money to buy food, but it’s smaller amounts than they’d have to spend on food on their own—Knuts instead of Sickles or Galleons. The house elves take that and use it in markets run by house elves who are bound to harvest and take care of the food, rather than clean and care for a single specific household. They buy the food cheaply, but it’s still good. The house elves take the money back to whoever owns the fields. That’s the way that a few pureblood families have profited all these years, really: supplying the house elf market. They could raise the price at any time, and they have, sometimes. That’s part of the reason that some pureblood families, like the Weasleys, stopped owning house elves. It was cheaper for them to conjure or buy their own food, especially when they had a good Transfiguration wizard, than send the house elves to buy it.”

“That’s not—“ said Draco. “You’re lying. You must be.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

“My father never mentioned anything like that.”

“Have you asked him?”

“Why would I ask him about house elves?”

“My point is made.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t suit you, Harry,” said Draco. He jabbed his fork into his pancakes and glared at them, wishing he didn’t have to think about them being made from flour and—other things that house elves bought at a house elf market, run over by squashy green fingers.

“Oh,” said Harry softly. “And here it was going to be my new way of facing the world.”

Draco shoved his plate back. The food didn’t taste good any more. “If you knew about this,” he said harshly, “why didn’t you do something about it years ago?”

“Because I didn’t know,” Harry said. “I wasn’t curious enough either, Draco. I’ve taken what steps I can to rectify that, but they’re very small, and some of them are undoubtedly too late. I’ve benefited as much as any wizard who attends Hogwarts by the fact that house elves are slaves here. And Merlin knows, now, what I’ve done to other species that I didn’t even realize at the time. The wizards who wove those webs were clever. They hid the house elf market and the webs themselves so that their descendants, us, would never even have to think about where our food came from and how our world got along. And thinking about it hurts, and involves self-blame, and will take years to heal. I do know that. I’m not demanding that everyone change right now if they object to changing. That’s the reason that I haven’t simply broken all the webs on house elves in Hogwarts with a wave of my hand. But I’m not going to join in this weaving as a deliberate affair any more. That’s the reason I didn’t go to Jiv’s owner

and tell him I could save her life, and her son's life. Either I would have had to let them die to make a point, or I would have had to conspire to put them back under webs if he decided that he wanted them his and alive. There are some things that my allegiance to other wizards and other wizards' free wills can't command, Draco, and active torture of another species is one of them."

Draco shook his head. "It's simpler than you think, Harry," he whispered. "Or more complex. I'm not sure which any more."

"Tell me which." Harry's voice had calmed a bit, no longer a raging tide, but more like calm, flowing water. "I'd be happy to listen, Draco. None of the arguments I've heard so far for keeping house elves as slaves sound reasonable to me, but maybe one will. Talk to me. Make me see the situation has some side I haven't considered."

"It's part of our heritage," Draco said quietly. "Can you understand that, Harry? My family is different from a family like the Weasleys, who let their house elves go. And I know that you don't care as much about family heritage, given that you renounced your last name and that you don't seem to even care about Black treasures except as a source of magic, but you should understand this. House elves are ours like the dances are ours."

"But the dances are a matter of training and binding yourselves," said Harry. "This trains and binds another species."

"That doesn't make a difference in the eyes of a pureblooded wizard considering his heritage." Draco made a vague gesture with his arm, and wished he could put what he meant into words more easily. "They're all the same. The house elves are a piece of it, neither more nor less important than the rest, that speaks a message about the family's wealth and purity of blood to another family."

"It's a message written in wasted lives, Draco." Harry's voice had acquired the passionate, quiet tone Draco had learned to fear. "I don't think that's worth either the ink or the parchment it requires."

"But it's there," said Draco. "And you said yourself, Harry, that you'd benefited from the enslavement of house elves. So you ought to be

able to understand this. How can you expect people to think differently about it when you yourself haven't thought differently about it until now?"

Harry watched him thoughtfully for a moment. Then he said, "I can't expect them to change their minds on the spot. What I can do is keep presenting the truth—and presenting myself with the truth. If I make assumptions, change them. If I make a mistake, atone for it. If I benefit from the services of house elves in some way I don't even notice right now, stop it. This path isn't ever going to end for me, either, Draco, any more than for a typical pureblood wizard, unless I actually manage to free all house elves in my lifetime, which frankly I would be surprised to see happen. There will always be something new to discover, something I neglected, something I should have thought of before and feel like an idiot for not thinking of. I have to change my thinking, test it. I'll throw ideas off a cliff and see if they shatter. And if they don't, they still have to be tested, again and again."

Draco shuddered. The notion of doing that to his own mind and thoughts revolted him. There was no rest in it, no peace.

And this was the kind of thing that Harry wanted to do for the rest of his life?

"Excuse me," he muttered, and stood, pushing back the bench, and fled from the Great Hall. He could feel Harry's eyes on his back the whole way, not condemning, but faintly puzzled, as if he did not understand why what he had said had scared Draco.

He can face up to that, maybe, Draco thought, as he leaned against the wall outside the Hall's entrance and tried to catch his breath. But how can anyone else? He's asking the rest of us to share that path? How can he?

What scared Draco most was that he couldn't stop thinking about the house elf markets, now, and how his family did pay for their food, just in small coins. And how it was a web that bound the house elves to serve the Malfoys, and not magic and pride and purity of blood that awed them into doing so, as Draco had been taught was the case.

If he could not stop thinking about those things, did that mean they would eventually draw him down the path to join Harry? That he would come to agree because those thoughts would not stop whispering in his head, would not stop confronting him with inconvenient truths?

That was a frightening thing.

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Draco felt the pull of the Imbolc ritual the moment he opened his eyes. He rolled slowly over and looked at Harry, who had spent the night with him, though he had spoken of little before they laid down and went to sleep. Harry lay with his cheek pillowed on his hand, his breathing soft and slow and deep. The Many snake curled around his throat, and the Omen snake wrapped around his legs, both shifted their heads to look at Draco.

The moment Harry opened his eyes, and their gazes locked, the ritual would begin.

Draco took a deep breath, and scrambled out of bed. He had to go to the loo first.

As he moved, he glanced at the small table next to the bed, where he'd arranged the materials he would need for the ritual. A branch from the Forbidden Forest marked the presence of wood. There was a delicate owl bone saved from Potions, and a corked vial of mouse's blood, and an iron heart bought from a shop in Hogsmeade. Harry had either not noticed as Draco slowly accumulated them, or had chosen to say nothing about them.

In a short time, Draco knew, he would have no choice. The ritual already swayed and flowed around him, insistent as a tide. This was a different kind of pull than the one at the Breaking of Boundaries, which wanted them near each other. This one felt like a call to battle, the horn that marked the beginning of ancient wars between Dark Lords and Light Lords.

And it should, Draco thought. This was the Presence of War.

He shut the door of the loo behind him and raked his fingers through his hair, striving to slow his breathing. The Presence of War would affect him the wrong way if he weren't calm. Draco would enter the battle half-hysterical, and determined to win, when that wasn't the ritual's purpose at all. It was to show up the differences in the minds of the joined partners, make them see and feel where their deepest disagreements lay, and how they might function as comrades in battle despite that. Just as this year's Walpurgis ritual, the fifth one in the cycle, would reaffirm them as friends and lovers, the Presence of War was meant as an exploration of the relationship they would share when they fought.

The depth from the Breaking of Boundaries would still be there. Draco was almost not looking forward to that. He and Harry would slide into each other's minds. This time, though, the magic would guide what they saw.

And it would not all be wonderful.

"Draco?" Harry was knocking on the door.

"I'll be right out," Draco shouted, damning his voice as it shook, and hurried to relieve himself. He wouldn't have time for a shower. That was all right. The Presence of War was in the room, gliding shadows of curses haunting the walls, and one was rarely clean on a battlefield, anyway.

He finished, and washed his hands, and then opened the door. His eyes met Harry's.

Harry gasped as the ritual sliced the air between them, as their minds opened and slid into each other's. Draco braced himself with one hand against the door, blinking dizzily. That was the only way he could keep hold of his own body as his head turned and his thoughts blended with Harry's in a context that made having just one opinion seem bizarre.

He swam down into a chasm of guilt he hadn't known existed. Harry did harbor some guilt about having benefited from house elf slavery from so many years, and he was determined to help lift house elves' webs partially so that he didn't have to suffer any more. It was a selfish motive that he didn't seem to have considered. Draco spun and showed the chasm to Harry, wondering what he would say about it.

Harry's answer was to expose a tiny nugget Draco hadn't been aware of in himself: that even if he came to believe Harry was right, he would still act as if he were wrong, and refuse to think about it, much the way he refused to think about his father killing Mudbloods, because to do otherwise was to lack family pride. And is avoiding humility any better a motive than avoiding guilt? Harry asked.

Draco flinched, but felt his anger rising to sustain him. He just had to balance that anger, keep it cold instead of burning hot, so that the Presence of War wouldn't urge him and Harry into an all-out battle. He replied, At least I know what I am. I've always been a Malfoy. That's always been important to me.

Even though your father disowned you? Harry spun out skeins of memory: Draco's decision to go to Harry during the rebellion, his joy and relief when Draco had come to Woodhouse, Draco's spiteful reply to Lucius that had probably encouraged Lucius's own stubbornness. And is being a Malfoy more important to you than I am?

Draco snarled at him. That's not a fair question, Harry.

I think it deserves an answer.

Then I think I deserve an answer. Is being vates more important to you than I am?

Harry, infuriatingly, swung into cold anger as if he'd been swimming there all his life, tumbling down through cascades of light while he considered, without letting up on his irritation with Draco. It's the most important task I have, said Harry at last. That doesn't mean it's more important than you are. I put people and tasks in different categories.

That's like asking if breathing is more important to me than eating. They both matter vastly to me. I might die more slowly if you take one away from me than I would the other, but they're both necessary to sustain life.

This was why Draco hated arguing with Harry, because he managed to make everything sound so reasonable.

Harry tossed back images of Draco sulking in a corner, or hitting Connor with a hex that turned his hair purple, or something else juvenile. He disliked arguing with Draco because Draco often acted like a child, or believed something was right and just wouldn't admit it.

I'm not a child nearly as often as your brother is, Draco snarled. And you go along with it, you know. Or else why play that prank where you told me that the charms on your Firebolt meant you couldn't rescue him and he drowned?

That was a mistake, said Harry. I'm sorry for it. How many bloody apologies do you need, Draco? Fourteen? Sixteen? Ten?

I need you to mean it. I need you to care enough for me in the first place that you wouldn't have agreed to play the prank just to appease your brother.

And if I agree to do something just to appease you? How is that different?

I'm your partner. I should matter more than your brother.

Just the way that I matter more than your father and your family name. I see.

You have no idea what it's like. You're not pureblood.

I can see into your mind at the moment, Draco. I have an excellent idea of what it's like. I'm seeing it in all the particulars. Harry's voice grew edged with acid. It seems that most of what it 'means' to be pureblood doesn't have its own significance. You define yourself in relation to your opposites. You couldn't be pureblood if there weren't

Mudbloods. And you couldn't raise yourself above other families if there weren't families like the Weasleys who were poor. You depend on them for your existence. Your history songs and your dances and your manners are so wound into them that without them, you'd have no context to put the songs and the dances and the manners in. And that's really fucking pathetic, Draco.

Draco knew he was wounded, that if he thought too seriously about Harry's words, he had the potential to let them go too deep. So he defended himself by reaching for the tangled knot of emotions that still lay closest to Harry's center. And you? Have you thought about what it means that you could have beauty and wealth and power and pride, and you ignore it all because—why? You don't find them of inherent value? Have you ever thought that someone else valuing them might be right? That thousands of wizards down the generations valuing them might mean you should give them another look?

Because they're not important to me. Harry's voice had a sound of self-satisfaction that Draco hated. At least before his latest change, he might retreat and admit that Draco could have a point. Now, he trusted his own impressions enough to stand his ground.

And you love that about me, admit it.

Harry's voice sounded as if it were coming from the center of his mind. Draco started. He hadn't thought Harry had slid that far, that deep, that fast.

I have. He felt Harry's presence turning like a snake in a burrow in the center of his mind, nudging at the core of his beliefs. You'll always be something finer and stronger than you want to allow yourself to be, Draco. When the situation calls for it, you can rise into that strength. You'll fight and defend me from your father because I matter to you. You'll choose between your family and me, when it wasn't right or fair to force you to do so, because you didn't concentrate on the rightness or fairness of the circumstances. When you think about what you want, and are persuaded that it's time to make an effort to achieve it, you soar. The rest of the time, you're content to creep on the ground, or sulk and wait for the person arguing with you to get tired of the

argument. That's it, isn't it, Draco? The problem with your making a change isn't that you're incapable of thinking anyone who isn't a pureblood is right. It's that—

Don't you dare say it, Harry Potter, Draco warned him.

It's laziness. And fear. Fear of what such an immense change would mean, laziness about making that change at the deepest levels of your being.

Draco rushed him.

It was a physical charge, a short one that ended with him tackling Harry to the floor. But it was more a mental charge, one that carried him over the barriers Harry had put in the way and landed him squarely in the center of Harry's own mind.

He could see glittering justifications stretched all around him. Harry had his own fears, and chief among them was yielding to the longings he sometimes experienced, for freedom and beauty of his own, or to lie back and not take life so seriously for a morning, or to just do the easier thing, like letting house elves feed him. He hadn't destroyed those desires. It wasn't that he never felt them. Instead—

Draco laughed. You think I'm afraid of something ridiculous, Harry? Look at yourself! Do you really think wallowing in bed for a morning would mean that you go on wallowing the next day, and the next day, and the next day, and never experience self-denial again? He snorted.

I got over those, Harry defended himself. I'm growing better. I value pleasure now, and I know that I deserve it.

Not all the time. Draco nudged and poked some more. You still have those ridiculous fears. You still hope your noticing of beauty will go away. You still welcome the backsliding you'll do, because it proves to you you're human. You've finally reached the point at which you count yourself equal to other people. Well done. Now acknowledge that most of the time you're better than they are, more. It's lying if you don't, and burying your head in the sand. It means that you get frustrated at them for not making 'easy' decisions that are really only

easy to you. You're not everyone, Harry, and it's silly to pretend you are. Count yourself extraordinary.

Confront your fears.

You first.

The Presence of War snorted around them like a well-satisfied horse, and Draco started. He'd been so caught up in the argument that he hadn't thought of keeping his balance, only the battle. And now Harry was aware of the pulsing magic, too, and he stilled beneath Draco, his fish-like thoughts stirring the water with their tails.

What comes next? He asked it as though he hated to ask Draco anything, but Draco was the one who knew about the ritual, so he had to. Draco gloated in the knowledge, and received a lash of fiery anger back. That would be so magnificent if Harry ever let it out in sex, he thought.

Does everything come back to fucking with you?

It comes back to fucking with you, Draco corrected, and then stood. Harry rolled his head to track his progress as Draco went over to the table beside the bed and gathered up the branch, the bone, the vial of blood, and the iron heart. When he carried them back over, Harry sat up.

What are those?

Honestly, you should be able to see. You're in my head. But I'll indulge your own laziness. Draco grinned at Harry's snarl, and laid the objects out on the floor. Now. You have to choose one of them.

And do what with them?

Just choose, first. Feel drawn to them. Listen to what one calls you.

Harry's eyes narrowed; he suspected Draco was making fun of him. But he turned and looked at the objects, reaching out, his hand hovering over them.

Draco let his breathing slow, and turned his own attention to the objects. The iron heart didn't call to him. Nor did the vial of blood. But that meant his hand swerved towards the bone and the branch, and he knew, he just knew, that whichever one he chose wouldn't be the one Harry chose.

Sure enough, his hand closed on the bone, and Harry's on the branch.

What does that mean? Harry demanded.

Draco replied before Harry could dig through his mind looking for the answer, which would have been uncomfortable. The four objects all have different meanings. The ritual is called the Presence of War, but it used to be known as the Bonding of Wood and Bone and Blood and Iron. He turned to face Harry, folding his legs in front of him. It has to do with facing war, and which object you consider to be the way you fight. Iron is strong, but more brittle than most metals; it needs to be forged into steel before it can take blows. That's the war of someone who would rather do anything than surrender. And blood flows everywhere, but it dries. That's the war-way of someone who would rather shed the blood and then forget about it. Vengeance answers for all. Last time pays for all, he added, on an inspiration; he knew that Harry knew the phrase from the justice ritual he'd used on his mother.

Harry nodded slowly. And the bone?

It means that I prefer digging out conflicts. Draco gave the bone a light twitch. I can break. I'm more fragile than the iron is, even. But bones are usually surrounded by ligaments and flesh and tendons that protect them and prevent them from snapping simply from the ordinary stresses of life. I like to surround myself with that context, and then dig far enough down to feast on the bones of my enemies. I prefer allies, not acting on my own.

The wood? Harry turned the branch back and forth in his hand, as if to admire it. He probably was, Draco thought.

You're alive. You change and grow around conflict. I can do that, too, but bone grows with less force and more slowly than a tree does. A tree can break a branch and still be mostly alive, while a broken bone has to be reassembled. Draco reached out and laid his hand on Harry's arm. Of course, you also bow before storms, and can drop individual branches to keep the roots and the trunk thriving. So you'll compromise more readily than I can, and listen to others' angry winds more readily than I can.

And that means we're not right for each other?

It does not, Draco said, barely resisting the urge to snap. We needed to see into each other's heads instead of just choosing wood or bone or blood or iron so that we would understand each other's choices. The Breaking of Boundaries confirmed our essential likeness. This confirms one of our essential differences. And now we have to live with it, instead of backing out.

Harry caressed the branch for a moment, looking thoughtful. Then he leaned forward and kissed Draco, hard.

Draco was happy enough to return the kiss, even though he pulled back a moment later and said, We still have things to talk about, you know, and you also know that you'll end up compromising before I will.

And you know that you'll shatter before I will, and that I'll be there to reassemble you, Harry retorted.

Draco smiled in spite of himself. So long as that's clear.

It is.

Draco lay back, and settled in for a debate on the ethics of house elves, Mudbloods, and whatever else Harry wanted to discuss. Hard satisfaction, rather like a bone itself, shone in his chest.

They were not perfectly matched. But Draco thought he would have been more worried if they were. There was no way that their wildly disparate lives could have shaped them that well for each other. "A

perfect match” would have meant large discrepancies, somewhere, they were ignoring.

And now they knew each other better, and their arguments could proceed on the basis of confidence instead of ignorance.

They might not convince each other for a long time. But they were speaking. And if one of them was bone and the other wood, at least they had good reasons for being so.

Draco could live with Harry being a tree in battle, if only because he knew he was flesh where it counted.

I did hear that, you know.

Chapter Sixty-Three: And Fire Goes Free

“Harry!”

Harry jerked his head up. He was becoming more attuned to joy than to anger now, at least if the anger wasn't confined in a ritual Draco had told him only later was called the Presence of War, and the joy in Hermione's voice was transcendent.

“What is it?” he asked, as she ducked around a shelf and avoided Madam Pince's glare as if by accident. She pushed a piece of parchment into his hand and stood beside the table, bouncing from foot to foot. Harry, glancing over her shoulder, saw that Zacharias had followed her and hovered near the door of the library, blinking now and then. He wouldn't often have seen her like this, Harry guessed.

“Just read the letter,” said Hermione. “It's not from one of the people I sent ‘Fourteen Simple Spells or Charms That Can Substitute For House Elf Work’ to, but I think that doesn't matter. Wait until you see who it is from. More people are hearing about E.L.F., Harry!”

Harry smiled and shoved his book aside. He'd been researching the ethics of willing sacrifice for some means of getting around Horcruxes, but he could afford to take a few minutes and see what had made Hermione so excited.

The letter was written in a flowing, wavy script Harry had never seen before, and blue ink. He half-closed his eyes as words about blue ink came back to him, from the books that Aurora Whitestag and Griselda had insisted he study. The color meant a desire for peace and reconciliation, and was often used for treaties. The script, though—he couldn't remember seeing a mention of that anywhere.

Dear Harry:

I know we have met before, but it was not under the best of circumstances. When I heard about your desire to free house elves, I persuaded one of my allies, of the Fiona family, to send a copy of his

letter on the subject to me. I had not received one, for obvious reasons.

I find your arguments compelling. Given that I try to live, always, in accordance with the ideals of the Light, I would not like to think I had enslaved house elves, even accidentally. But I am not convinced by the idea that the webs have endured since ancient times and have induced the desire for natural servitude in the elves, rather than preyed on it. I would like to meet with you and discuss this further. If you manage to persuade me, I would free my house elves.

That last is on my honor as a wizard and a faithful follower of the Light.

Of course, it would be wrong, according to the ancient dances, for you to visit me alone and without an introduction, and most of your allies would find my estate—painful, given the number of wards that are up to protect my family against Dark wizards. Therefore, I would ask that you bring my daughter with you. She knows the place, and can reassure you of both the position of the wards and my good intentions. I look forward to the visit.

Yours in the Light,

Cupressus Apollonis.

With an effort, Harry kept himself from balling up the parchment and throwing it across the room. He did manage to summon a smile and look up at Hermione with that smile firmly in place.

“That’s brilliant, Hermione,” he said.

“No, it’s not.” Hermione narrowed her eyes and leaned forward to stare into his face. “What’s the matter, Harry? Don’t you think he’s sincere?”

At one point, Harry might have lied to make her feel better. Now, he shook his head. “No,” he said. “He’s still angry that Ignifer refused him by becoming Dark. He cursed her with infertility. And now he

wants me to bring her along when we go to his estate in Ireland. I think this is just another ploy to get her back.”

“He doesn’t say anything about that,” Hermione pointed out doubtfully, looking at the letter as if it would somehow proclaim Cupressus’s bad intentions through the ink.

“Well, he wouldn’t, would he?” Harry shook his head and made an attempt to calm himself. It was hardly Hermione’s fault that Cupressus had been the first to respond, though it was a disappointment. “But, trust me, Hermione, this is just a ploy. The day he’s sincere about freeing his house elves is the day he takes the curse off Ignifer, and I don’t think that will ever happen.”

Hermione’s eyes and face were chill. “So he said he would take the curse off if she—“

“Came back to him and Declared for Light again.” Harry swept a hand over his face. “After Declaring for Dark because the wild Dark saved her life when she called. She’s only keeping her word of honor. But, of course, that word of honor is null and void when it comes to the Dark.”

“So what should I do?” Hermione looked doubtfully at the letter. “This was folded up inside a letter for me that said my project sounded interesting to him and he wanted more information. I thought he was sincere then. He spoke of the Light and free will and how much he wanted to obey the ideals of the Light.”

“Oh, he does,” said Harry, his mind lingering on the unpleasant man he’d met almost a year ago now, at the spring equinox alliance meeting. Cupressus was another Augustus Starrise, another Lucius Malfoy, dedicated to the Light but far more dedicated to having things all his own way. “Just his interpretation of them.”

Hermione nodded. “And you think that would include treating Muggleborns like house elves?”

Harry blinked. “I don’t know all the specifics of that,” he said. “But I think it might.”

Hermione nodded again. "And Merlin knows, I could never live with anyone who did that," she said.

Zacharias flinched. Harry shook his head, and turned back to his book as Hermione left the library. "I'll write an answer to Cupressus thanking him but refusing his offer," he called after her—quietly, so as not to rouse the wrath of Madam Pince. "What you choose to do is up to you."

“Isn’t it always?” Hermione said, and then snapped out of the library and was gone. Harry went back to concentrating furiously on what the book had to say about willing sacrifices. So far, it merely consisted of repeating what Acies had told them, but in more boring terms and with less clear and succinct language.

There is a way. Somewhere, there must be a way.

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“Hermione?”

She halted in walking down the hall and turned to face him, her hands on her hips and the letter from Apollonis crumpled against her robe. “What is it, Zach?”

She knows I hate to be called that. But it wasn't something Zacharias could complain about—not now, not when so much else lay between them. He took a deep breath and tried for a winning smile that didn't come out that winning when Hermione faced him with her glare. "Can we talk?"

“Will it end better than our last conversation?” There was a slice of pain in her eyes, buried deep. Zacharias was almost glad to see it. At least it made her more human, without the constant bustle and determination that had lifted her, for a while, into the realm of someone not all that human, like Harry.

“That was your fault—” Zacharias began.

Hermione took a step towards him. "Zacharias, you implied that not only were house elves beneath your consideration as a serious topic of conversation, but so were the rights of Muggleborns. I've found means of discrimination in the laws. Only Muggleborn children are monitored for the use of magic at home. That's what all that elaborate Ministry language meant." She took a deep breath that had pain dragged on the end of it. "Now, I can think of some reasonable arguments you could present to that, though I wouldn't accept them. That there are no magic-using adults in Muggle homes, for example, and so Muggleborn children need to be forbidden from using their wands during the holidays in case of accidents. Even though it does mean that they come back to school with less practice doing certain kinds of spells, which I'm sure is a coincidence," she added in a mutter. "But you said that only a fool would think that was an interesting thing to talk about."

"I—" Zacharias swallowed what he had meant to say, which was a defense of the pureblood point-of-view, and looked at her, hard. Hermione was tired, and her eyes avoided his for a moment, as though she wanted to brace herself for the coming argument. But, for the first time, those signs didn't comfort him with thoughts of an imminent victory just ahead. They made him feel—wrong. It was wrong that Hermione should look that way, but especially wrong that she should look that way when speaking with him.

He held out his arm. "Can we walk?"

The stunned glance that she lifted to him hurt; he could admit it. But he kept holding out his arm, and didn't specify a position for her to grip it in with his own hand. He left it up to her whether she would walk with him as a pureblood witch or an ordinary woman.

Hermione blinked for a moment, then shifted the letter from Apollonis to her left hand and draped her fingers over his arm. Zacharias noticed, and told himself not to rejoice in, the fact that she'd taken up the position of an older witch being escorted by a younger wizard.

They paced down the hall together, and headed out the doors, by common agreement. Zacharias cast a warming charm; the February air bit more than he would have expected, and Hogwarts's grounds

were deep in snow. Hermione cast a complicated spell, one of her variants, that warmed both her hands and her robes. Zacharias felt as if he were walking next to a roaring fire.

Would you be stupid enough to reject a new spell just because someone who wasn't pureblood invented it?

Of course, from what Zacharias knew of history, his ancestors hadn't done that, and nor had other pureblood wizards. They had simply adopted the spell into their own repertoires and detached it from its owner as soon as possible, so that no one would know someone with dirty blood had been its source. It was of a piece, or so said Hermione, with denying they had any Muggle ancestry, or saying that every Lord-level wizard had been pureblood. It was a commonly accepted truism, but that did not make it the truth. Half of pureblood history was woven of lies, of stories that made good stories but poor truth.

Zacharias did not think it was half. A tenth, at most. But he was in love with a woman who believed otherwise, and he would have to either compromise with her or lose her.

He blinked at the wall of the courtyard, which was covered with traceries of frost. Discovering that he was willing to compromise should happen in a calm setting with sweet wine and a chance to think, he thought. Not outside in a cold so keen he was beginning to shiver once more.

Before, he hadn't seriously thought of listening to what Hermione said. She would get over it, and they would live together the way they had planned, putting one over on smug pureblood society by pretending to be part of it in public and laughing about it in private.

Only, the months had passed, and Hermione had not changed her stance, nor grown less interested in the Grand Unified Theory and the concept of rights for Muggleborns that would make them equal to pureblood wizards. And now she was interested in house elf rights, and Zacharias knew there was no way she could pretend to be pureblood again. Too many people would know her name now as the

person who made up lists of reasons to stop using house elves and sent them in the post.

Zacharias had held back. He had tried to argue her around, and he had tried to use cold silence to make her come running back, and he had tried to reason with himself that this was the only thing he could do. His mother had taught him the importance of family and heritage—and heritage was what this was really about, not blood. Hermione would have to see that, too, or else she just wasn't a good wife for him.

But maybe I wasn't a good husband for her, either, the way I was acting.

"Hermione?" he asked at last.

"Hmmm?" She tilted back her head to look at him. She had a snowflake caught in her eyelashes. Last year, Zacharias would have taken the chance for a kiss, but they were too far apart to risk it right now.

Still, though. He had made sacrifices of his own. The badger scar on his cheek, left over from his summoning of Helga Hufflepuff when he had learned that Hermione was dying of a Severing Curse, twinged. He had done what was only supposed to be done for blood or love, and he was going to let her go?

He stepped away from her and lifted her hand to his lips. "Can we begin again?" he asked, breath warm against her skin.

Hermione did not melt as he would have liked her to; she considered him carefully instead, lights rippling and gleaming in her brown eyes. "And you'll consider what I have to say seriously?"

"Yes."

"And you won't assume I have any desire to conform to what purebloods want, that there's some inherent rightness in those rituals that I have to sense just because I'm Muggleborn?" Defiant words,

bravely spoken, but Zacharias could hear the yearning underneath her tone. He was not the only one who had missed someone.

"I won't assume that," he said, and moved closer, and clasped her hands in his own, looking earnestly down at her. "The one unforgivable crime, my mother taught me once, is lying to yourself. And I've been doing it for months now. I've pretended that rituals matter more to me than you." He shrugged. "And that's not true."

Hermione's mouth fell slightly open, and then she caught herself and shut it again. "I can think of other unforgivable crimes," she muttered.

Zacharias held her eyes, and waited. He had made the first moves. She would have to make the next set. He had made mistakes. So had she. If she was unable to compromise, then they would have to separate.

Until the next time you realize how much you miss her, the taunting voice in the back of his head whispered.

Zacharias ignored it, and waited.

Hermione sighed, and stepped forward, and kissed him, delicately, on the lips. It wasn't all that proper; the partner of purer blood was supposed to guide the kiss, in most dances. But Zacharias let it pass, this once.

"I'll let you have a chance," Hermione whispered. "One more."

The words did not frighten him. Where there was one more chance, there was the ability to win a second. Or a third, or a fourth.

The courtyard of Hogwarts was as strange a place to come back together again as it was to discover he was in love, Zacharias thought. But he would take it.

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"I don't think it's a good idea."

"I can't pass it up." Ignifer paced back and forth in the center of the room, not looking at Honoria. "You know what he has. Harry didn't say anything about that in his letter, so I'm sure Father hasn't mentioned it to him. He has information, Honoria. Information about Lucius dealing with the Unspeakables, but also information about one other person." She spun, letting her robes flare behind her. It was easier to watch their swirl than to look into her lover's eyes. "We need that information. Who knows who the other person is? I've tried to think, but the clues he gives are too vague."

Honoria stepped in front of her, grasping Ignifer's chin and forcing her to look at her. "You know what price he's going to demand."

Ignifer took a deep breath and met Honoria's eyes. They were full of love and compassion, but also fear.

She really thinks that I'll walk into my old house and give away my freedom.

Ignifer reached out, gripping Honoria's wrist and holding it tighter and tighter until the smaller woman let her go with a wince. "I have to do this," she whispered. "I want to do this. It's possible that he'll ask some smaller price from me than the surrender of my free will and the Declaration back to the Light, and Harry needs that information. He's given me so much, Honoria: a place to belong and be myself again. I want to give something back to him."

"You've sworn the oaths of the Alliance," said Honoria, anger bleeding into her voice. She moved her head in a single sharp jerk that reminded Ignifer of a gull pecking at something that annoyed it. "You've saved his life. You've fought for him. What more does he have a right to ask of you?"

"It's not what he has a right to ask of me," Ignifer said softly, turning away. "It's what I want to offer."

"You know that your father would make you give me up," Honoria told her back. "He would say that you couldn't have a female lover if he accepted you back into the family. He would want you to marry someone and bear him a magical heir. For all that the Light families

don't care about magical heirs, Ignifer, your father was certainly pleased that you were his, wasn't he?"

“He was,” said Ignifer distantly. She remembered the days she had spent with Cupressus, asking questions no one else would be allowed to ask, touching objects in his study that would have involved curses if her younger siblings had touched them, and learning old secrets of Ireland that not even the other Light pureblood families knew. Once, she had known her world and her life and her place. She had given up more than mere comfort, more than a home, when she chose the Dark. And now it was her choice to go back and face what she had left behind.

Honorina did not understand. She was not going to embrace principles she had abandoned. She was going to embrace freedom.

But sharing the idea would diminish the prospect, somehow, Ignifer felt. She wanted to hold and entertain this idea alone.

And, if nothing else, it made a good test of how much Honoria and Harry really trusted her, what they thought she would do in pursuit of freedom.

She turned and cast a handful of Floo powder into the flames. Her mother's head appeared almost at once; Ignifer so rarely firecalled first that she thought the house elves had standing orders to fetch one of her parents when she did.

She met Artemis's eyes and spoke in Latin, the language of her childhood, her first language, the kind of peace offering her mother would mistake for more than it was. "Tell Father that I'm coming home, and that I will accompany Harry when he does so, to talk about house elves."

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“Vates. A pleasure.” Cupressus Apollonis performed a flowing bow. He straightened up and kept his eyes on Harry, not Ignifer, though she stood right behind him. From reading those books on the Light pureblood rituals, Harry knew this was how it was supposed to go.

each guest welcomed individually. “I greet you with no blade, with no shut door, with no wand raised, but with an open door and in the hopes that you will consider this house your own.”

A pretty blessing. Harry extended his magical senses as he inclined his head, a bit, and returned the proper words. He wanted to sniff out any compulsion spells Cupressus might be using before they found him. There must be a reason that Ignifer had persuaded him to come to her father’s house and talk about freeing the house elves, and there must be a reason that she had chosen to accompany him, but Harry did not know what it was. Cupressus compelling her would make a good explanation. “And I step through the open door onto a path that I can hope will be walked in the light of sun and moon and stars and fire, themselves each a source of light.”

Cupressus sighed softly. “Ah. I do not often hear the old words any more. Such a pleasure to have them vibrate in my ear.” He turned to Ignifer then, and held out his hands, in a simple mark of appreciation that Harry could not have made—but would when he had his left hand back, Harry reminded himself, to silence his momentary envy. “And daughter. Welcome home.”

Harry started, then caught himself and averted his eyes. The blessing was the one a parent would actually use to welcome a straying child, even though he knew that Cupressus could be doing no such thing, given how Ignifer would have to abase herself before her father would welcome her back.

He wouldn’t, would he?

Harry had to admit, grudgingly, that he had less idea of what Cupressus Apollonis would and would not do than he had thought. He understood Lucius well through long exposure, and the key to Augustus had been his obsession with his dead sister, but this man was more of a mystery.

“Father,” said Ignifer, and took one of his hands, and kissed both his cheeks.

Harry had to drop his eyes to the carpet so he wouldn't stare this time. He shook his head slightly and stepped forward, looking around the house so that he wouldn't try to speculate on the mechanics of a dance he didn't understand between parent and child. He had never been very good at that, anyway, given how little experience he had of true parenting.

The Apollonis home was large, with light flooding everywhere. Rather than walls, Harry saw, most of the house was all window, enormous planes of glass stretching from floor to ceiling, reinforced with spells so wind couldn't shatter them. Other spells, subtle enough that he had to work to notice them, collected the sunlight from outside and channeled it into beams that flashed and twinkled on the golden wood of the walls. The sun was not bright outside today—ordinary, pale winter light, barely encouraged by its gleam off the snow—but inside the Apollonis house, they seemed to be standing in the full flood of summer.

"Please, come further," said Cupressus, and gestured them forward, to where three chairs sat in front of the fire. One stood at a distance from the others, and he took that one. Harry had to suppress an exclamation as he sank into his own. It was wonderfully warm and comfortable, an adaptation of cushioning charms he had not known existed. When he looked up, Cupressus was lounging back, and his cheeks and mouth smiled, if not his eyes.

"The Light studies how we may make and better things," he said softly, "not how we may destroy them."

Harry held his tongue back from saying that his mother, Light-devoted, had done what she could to destroy him, and watched Ignifer to take his cue. She sat down in the chair next to him and showed no surprise. Of course, that could be because her eyes never moved from her father's face, and she did not want to demonstrate weakness in front of him.

A cup of wine appeared next to Harry—carved of wood, not glass. Harry looked from the liquid in it to Cupressus's face, and did not move.

"In deference to your sensibilities," said Cupressus, picking up his own cup and sipping, "I Summoned the wine, rather than having house elves serve us. And I assure you that this wine was prepared years ago, by the hands of Squib servants we had at the time, not house elves." He closed his eyes and sighed.

Harry, reluctantly, picked up his cup and drank. Openly doubting what Cupressus had said to him, implying that his host was deceiving him, was a serious breach of hospitality. The wine was warm, and sweet, with a sharp tang at the back of it that almost made him think lemons were involved in it somewhere.

"Now, we may adapt to the true business you have come about, I hope." Cupressus's eyes flared open, and Harry was reminded of a lazy cat lying in front of a mousehole. "You know one dimension of my offer, vates. I am interested in your arguments, and I do wish to free my house elves. There is another dimension that my daughter may not have told you of."

Harry glanced at Ignifer in surprise. Ignifer didn't move. "He has information, Harry," she said, voice like a cold blade in the midst of all this perfumed warmth. "Information about wizards dealing with the Unspeakables. One wizard is Dark and one is Light, I think. And both could hurt your cause."

I should have suspected the Unspeakables would begin to stir again. Of course, that led to the thought that Harry would like to know how Cupressus had got hold of this information. He turned back to the man. "You offer much," he said. "And I have heard no hint of a price thus far."

Cupressus smiled, a brilliant smile, well at home in this room of golden wood and off-golden sunlight. "The price is simple," he said. "And one that is in accord with history. When a Lord or Lady was challenged to a duel, for example, a sworn companion could stand in for him or her, and fight the duel instead. Or a sworn companion could give up a treasured heirloom, or a small part of his or her magic, in repayment for all that the Lord or Lady had done."

"Ignifer is not my sworn companion," Harry said.

“But she considers herself as such,” said Cupressus, and turned his head to look at Ignifer. “Do you not, my lady? I raised my daughter to think of honor as the supreme good in the world. And you fulfilled that, swearing to the Dark rather than the Light, because you believed it the honorable thing to do.” His eyes shone with what Harry could swear was pride. “It was hard for you; it was harder than hard, it was exile. And yet you resisted daily importuning from your mother and the urgings of your own conscience to return, because you had done what you thought was right. The long road can end, daughter. You can lay your burden down. You can come home. The only thing you must do is choose to embrace this simple trade, your old allegiance and your old obedience to me in return for the freedom of the Apollonis house elves and the information that I have to give.”

“She would be less honorable if she chose to betray the Dark now,” Harry said. He did not say the words above a hiss. He was too angry. He felt the drape of a scaled body around his shoulders, and the room around them deepened with the spread of jewel-like colors, blue and green and red.

Cupressus only raised an eyebrow. “Your magic is impressive, vates,” he said. “And it is what makes the difference in this situation. Ask my daughter.”

Harry turned helplessly to Ignifer, hoping for an explanation. She had put down the wooden cup of wine that had appeared for her, and sat with her elbows on the arms of her chair and her arms folded across her stomach.

“What he says is true, Harry,” she said, never taking her eyes from her father. “In most contexts, it would be utterly dishonorable for me to betray my oath to the Dark—though there would be some who would say that I should never have abandoned my allegiance to the Light in the first place.”

“True,” Cupressus murmured. Harry didn’t think he could help himself.

“But in this context?” Ignifer shook her head, her red-gold curls rustling around her head. Her yellow eyes, sign of a Light pureblood

family, were as calm as a hawk's. "No. I do consider myself a sworn companion, though I have never given you a scar on my arm, and that is all that matters to honor—the will of the individual. I could yield myself to fulfill the bargain. Other sworn companions have done as much and more in the past, and ended more tragically, on the end of a wand or a rope. An enemy of the Lord has been satisfied with killing them and so given up the notion of killing the Lord himself. Some of those enemies have even become allies afterwards, in admiration of the sworn companion's sacrifice." For a moment, a smile ghosted across her mouth. "I recall the tale of a man who executed a Lady's lieutenant, and then went on to become the Lady's sworn companion, and died defending her from a Killing Curse. That man was an Apollonis, Father, wasn't he?"

"He was indeed." Cupressus raised his cup in tribute to his daughter.

Harry wanted to snarl. It was wrong to talk so calmly and rationally about something so strange and against all common sense.

Then again, was it really any stranger than Lucius being proud, in their second year at Hogwarts, when Draco had outdanced him, and agreeing to do what he could to see that Harry was not expelled for Petrifying other students? Pureblood dances sometimes made people do very strange things in accord with honor.

"I am not a Light Lord," he tried.

"That does not matter." Cupressus's eyes, locked on Ignifer's, never moved. "Ignifer acts in relation to you as she would her Lord, Light or Dark. She is your sworn companion, and you are her leader, the one who gave her a home after she had none for fifteen years. This is her choice and her sacrifice to make." Now he did flick a glance in Harry's direction. "Unless you would stand in her way, my Lord of Free Will?"

Harry's hand tightened into a fist. Cupressus had baited the trap perfectly. Ignifer could have everything back that she wanted without feeling she was betraying what she had chosen. And Harry could no more interfere than he had interfered with Loki's sacrifice, or with Pansy's.

He leaned back, taut as a bowstring, and waited.

Did Ignifer know he would do this? She must have. Why else agree to come? She meant to trade her freedom for the freedom of house elves and whatever information Cupressus has to give me.

“Just think,” Cupressus said, his voice only a breath. “I am the leader of most of the Light pureblood families in Ireland, Harry. Once they see me giving up my house elves, they will begin to reconsider house elves’ value as a status symbol. If I can endure this with no loss of power, then they will begin to think that they can. You begin a revolution that will ripple across Ireland from here, vates. And such a small price. Delivered so willingly.”

Harry heard a ripple of cloth. He looked sideways to see Ignifer sliding to one knee, her robes puddling around her.

Harry wanted to look away, but his eyes felt frozen. For long moments, he held still, and Ignifer held still, and the world around them swayed like a bauble at the end of a chain.

In the silence, Ignifer’s words were soft, but very clear.

“I renounce my last name. I am no longer an Apollonis. I have no allegiance to that family, and—“ Her voice soared like a sunburst, dazzling, outraged, on fire. “Your curse has no power over a woman who is not your daughter!”

Harry felt magic snap through the room. This renunciation was simpler and more basic than the ritual he had used to give up his own last name, but also more primal, and in some ways more powerful. He felt the moment Ignifer and Cupressus’s last connection was stripped away, a shimmer of a bond that sparked into being between them and fell into ruin at the same moment. The world shifted. They were strangers now. Blood from one could not save the other, should one of them lie bleeding on the ground.

And the infertility curse on Ignifer was gone.

Ignifer was laughing, when Harry came out of his daze. She had stood, and her hair blazed around her, and her magic coiled up and down her arms as leaping flames, and her robes lifted in the streaming hot wind she had called. Cupressus was on his feet, his wand out, and firing curses that burned up when they neared Ignifer.

Harry stumbled to her side, and stared into her face. Ignifer looked down at him and sniffed. "Did you really think that I'd yield to the old bastard?" she asked. "I came to make one final test, to show myself how much I missed what I once had, to make myself see it and ask if this was what I wanted. And it isn't. Not at all." She shot a triumphant glance at Cupressus. "And now he has no reason to firecall me and taunt me with his power over my womb, and my mother has no reason to badger me daily. It's done. I'm free."

Harry could think of no words to say. He had never been more glad to see a sacrifice avoided. His hand closed on her arm and squeezed, hard.

"You know that no house elves in Ireland will be released now," said Cupressus. Already, when Harry looked at him, he had recovered and put his wand away. He might have looked cool and composed, were it not for his shaking hands. "I will campaign against it. I will advise my allies to hold on to their house elves no matter what happens."

"It was not worth the price that you asked," said Harry. "I will not end slavery with slavery."

"And the information I have?" Cupressus eyed him. "The time is rushing close when you will need it, Harry vates. You have no idea who stands against you, dim in the shadows, once a scion of Light."

"What price—"

"You know the price." Cupressus stared at Ignifer, who magnificently ignored him.

“Fuck you,” said Harry pleasantly, and turned away. “I am, as you reminded me today, a Lord-level wizard, Mr. Apollonis. I have no need to crawl.”

He accompanied Ignifer outside the house, feeling as if he were escorting a victor off the field of battle. Ignifer let her flames die when they stood on the steps, and tossed her head back, to breathe in a deep gulp of air.

“It tastes so much sweeter now that I’m not smelling it through an Apollonis nose,” she explained to Harry, when she caught him watching her.

Harry shook his head. He couldn’t stop smiling. “And you planned to do that?”

“It was a test, as I said.” Ignifer’s face was calm, and shone. “I had to tempt myself, to see what I could endure. As it turns out, I love freedom more than I thought. And Honoria.” Her hand found his and pressed it. “And you.”

Harry kissed the back of her hand. As they began to walk from the house towards the Apparition point, he asked, “Do you know what last name you’ll take?”

Ignifer’s smile flashed out, more mischievous than Harry had ever seen it. “I thought Pemberley might be nice,” she said. “Honoria’s mother did so wish that someone else would have the same last name as she did. I know she was thinking of grandchildren, but a wife might be a nice substitute.”

Harry laughed, and felt thoughts of difficulty, including what problems Cupressus could cause over house elves in the future, flame and die. For the moment, they stood in the light of a far different fire.

Chapter Sixty-Four: What He Meant

“Are you sure?”

Harry wanted to shout that, no, he wasn't sure, but he had made his decision. And he had put this off long enough, saying he wanted it, saying he didn't want it, claiming one thing and feeling another. He locked his eyes on Snape's and nodded.

Snape fastened the hand into place on the end of his left wrist, fingers moving with the same delicate slowness he used in brewing a volatile potion. Harry shuddered a bit as his arm sagged with the weight, and felt Draco, standing behind him, grip his shoulders in reassurance. Harry breathed in and licked his lips. If this goes well, I might be able to do that to Draco soon.

Snape's wand skimmed over the edge of the silver where it joined Harry's wrist, and he murmured the beginning incantations that would bond the hand to Harry's arm and start the long, long process of Transfiguring the metal into flesh and filling it with bones and knuckles, nails and blood. Harry felt Draco's own hands tighten again. He had wanted to do this for Harry, but his magic wasn't strong enough. It had to be a powerful wizard whom Harry trusted completely.

And then it was done, and Harry could feel the subtle, questing trails of magic traveling up his arm from his wrist, now and then sniffing as they took in the scent of his skin or blended with his own power. At one point, he thought he felt them colonize a vein, and start busily learning his blood. He shuddered slightly.

“You remember what Manus said,” Snape murmured, drawing Harry's attention back to him. “You have to use the hand as much as possible. Slip the fingers around those things you want to grip. Visualize making it bend and move even before it can. Position it on the handle of your broom alongside your right. And do welcome it, Harry.” His hand pressed on Harry's arm for a moment, hard enough to leave fingerprints. “If you don't, the magic will sense that and withdraw.”

"I know," Harry whispered. Those were all reminders that Rosalind Manus had given him, over and over, when Harry had finally chosen her shop and owled his order in, explaining what he wanted. Perhaps it was because they communicated solely by owl, and had never met in person, but she was refreshingly brisk about it, without peppering her post with exclamation marks and questions on the nature of her patron. She had asked innumerable questions about facts that Harry himself didn't know but had labored to find out, including the length of his fingers on his right hand and in what position the sun had been standing when Bellatrix had cut his original hand off. Harry understood that she needed to know that in order to create a model that would bond to him instead of having to be Transfigured by force—a process that usually resulted in an unholy mess—and so he'd done his best to answer.

He had balked, a bit, at the price; Draco and Snape had insisted that he choose without looking at the Galleons it would cost him, and Harry had, unwittingly, chosen the most expensive hand he possibly could. Regulus had firecalled him the same day and had a long, stern talk with him about blood pride and what the heir of the Black family could and could not do with his vault. Harry had argued until Regulus resorted to guilting him; Harry had spent Black money for other causes, after all, so why not this one? And it would help ease Regulus's own guilt, at not being in Harry's head when he lost his hand, and being gone for eight months and not there to help him when he needed it.

Harry had given in. Now, he wondered if he shouldn't have.

"Stop worrying at it, Harry," Draco said into his ear. "If you do worry at it, then it's just going to detach, and you'll have spent the money for nothing."

That made Harry try to relax and think welcoming thoughts. The trails of magic winding through his arm, which had slowed for a moment, brightened to red and gold under his skin, and wended faster.

"That's it," Draco whispered into his ear, and Harry let himself think only of that, the whisper on his earlobe and the soothing rub in his shoulder, and watched as the lines shrank and glowed and thrummed.

"You will be whole again," Snape said a few minutes later, into the silence.

Harry looked up in surprise at his guardian's tone. Snape leaned on the wall, his face as close to relaxed as it ever came, his eyes fastened on the silver gleam of Harry's new hand. It was news to Harry that Snape had been hurt, in his own way, by the loss of his hand, but it was another reason to strive for and keep it.

And you can want it, he told himself sternly. Just like anyone else would. Normal person, remember?

“Thank you, Severus,” he told Snape, and then turned and nodded to Draco. “Let’s go practice. I don’t want everyone in the Great Hall gawking when I nearly tip over my pumpkin juice.”

“They’re going to gawk anyway.” Draco rubbed his chin along the side of Harry’s neck, eyes almost closed, an expression of sleepy contentment on his face. “But at least it should be for the right reasons.”

Harry smiled, a bit, and imagined he could feel the fingers flex in return.

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Draco approved highly of Harry's new hand. For one thing, he had chosen well; the hand was beautiful as gleaming silver, and would adapt to Harry's arm much more smoothly than most of the other models, eventually making a hand as lovely as the rest of his body was.

For another, his lover would have two hands for the first time. Draco did look forward to seeing what would happen in bed, then.

“Pay attention, Draco.”

Peter did tend to notice when one of them slipped out of contemplating the Animagus transformation. Draco bit his lip and

closed his eyes, sending his mind back to what it should be doing: fixing on his Animagus form.

He knew he was something small, lithe, four-legged. But he could still see only the silhouette. It frustrated him, this endless process of seeing what was really there, what he really was, instead of what he wished for. He had wasted a week with wings because he had hoped his form would be able to fly. Peter had questioned him sternly, informed Draco that a four-legged form was still marvelous, and returned him to the simple drills of visualization until he could promise meekly that he would try not to let his desires interfere again.

Draco was beginning to see why so few wizards became Animagi. One might be stuck as an animal one didn't want, and it took so long even with an expert teacher, and it required such bloody patience.

He focused on his form again, scowling at it. He could see the shadow of a turned neck, a graceful, lifted head. The animal he would become stood at an odd position in his mind. Peter had had him look through books—not for images, but reading them, trying to recognize the name of the creature he naturally thought of as standing in such a position. Nothing worked. Draco was beginning to despair of seeing his form at all, or at least seeing it before Potter saw his.

His thoughts wandered again, but this time, he kept his eyes closed and his breathing deep and even, just this side of drifting off to sleep, and he didn't think Peter would be able to tell. He was thinking of his father's latest letter, the one in which Lucius had all but sworn to take back the disownment—if only Draco would admit he had been wrong. Since that would take away the force of his decision, Draco had refused, in lines he still thought of as clever and scathing.

Clever, he congratulated himself. I am that. And cunning. That befits a proper Slytherin, but not all of them are as clever as I am.

He started as the silhouette in his mind moved, turning fully towards him, but clung to his current train of thought. Peter had told them that sometimes this would happen; if they thought of something that coincided with their animal form, it might reveal itself to them.

Clever. Cunning. What is small and lithe and clever and cunning, able to adapt and survive the way I can, capable of great effort when necessary but preferring to take smaller prey? He knew from the shadow of teeth that his form was a predator. And though it stung to adopt Harry's description of him as lazy and only doing well when he needed to, it made his form spring forward, shadows peeling back from it, showing him the gleaming edge of a jaw, sharp teeth, bright amber eyes, a coat as pale as moonlight, a body adapted to slipping into holes and along the banks of streams to fool the hounds—

Draco opened his eyes with a shout. Peter glared at him, and so did Potter, jolted out of his trance. Harry looked at him expectantly, with a smile that widened as he stood and came over, putting his arms around Draco. A moment later, two hands pressed against Draco's spine, holding him.

"You found your form," he said.

Draco nodded, his heart singing with triumph, especially since he could look over Harry's shoulder and see Peter's and Potter's expressions turn to ones of interest and envy, respectively.

"What is it?" Harry whispered in his ear.

"A fox," said Draco. He knew his voice was smug. He did not care. "A white fox. I should have guessed. Foxes are the epitome of cunning. They're supposed to have magical powers, and dance to lure their prey close to them. And they're clever. They'll run through streams and ride on the backs of sheep to escape the hounds."

"They live in dark holes, too," Potter muttered. "How appropriate."

Peter laid a hand on Potter's shoulder and gave him a stern look. Then he nodded at Draco. "Very good, Draco," he said. "Now that you know your form, and exactly what it looks like, you can begin the exercises that will blend your human body with your—vulpine one." He had hesitated a moment, to remember the correct adjective. Now he smiled. "More weeks of work ahead of you."

Harry sighed into his ear. “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing,” he murmured into Draco’s ear. “Oh, Draco, be careful. Remember the many things that will save your life, and don’t forget the one big thing that might doom you.”

“You’re telling me to see the forest for the trees, Harry?” Draco had not experienced pure joy in a few days, at least. It was pleasant to see it again. “I promise I’ll look. And you can be my eyes in the dark, since you’re the lynx.”

Harry drew back, grinning, and pushed his shoulder. "That's not certain yet."

Draco pinched him back. Harry hissed. "Oh, yes, it is," he said, and ruffled Harry's hair. "My little kitten."

Harry hissed at him again, sternly enough this time that the Many snake on his throat uncoiled. Peter shook his head and clucked his tongue. "Children," he said. "Settle down to visualizing again." He paused. "Well, Harry, at least. Draco, come with me. I need to show you which books you'll be using now."

Draco followed him, smug both in the knowledge that he knew what his form was now, and that he'd got there before Potter.

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“Thank you for coming to meet me, sir.”

Adalrico chuckled in spite of himself and held out his hand to Harry. "Still so formal, when we have been allies for more than three years, vates," he said. "Please, call me Adalrico, as you call Mrs. Parkinson Hawthorn."

Harry relaxed a bit, and his smile warmed his face. Adalrico glanced over his shoulder, taking in their surroundings and making sure no one was nearby to threaten Harry. Granted, they were meeting in front of the Ministry, in the same alley where Harry had ridden the dragon, but one could not be too careful of enemies. Adalrico and

Elfrida still warded their home tightly when one of them left, and they had only placed Marian in the care of a trusted friend one or two times. Life in the wizarding world had been difficult, once, and when it turned difficult again, those who were prepared for it would survive the best.

Adalrico almost wished the difficulty would hurry up and arrive. Then he could go to war again. Peace was telling on him. He woke from dreams of the First War now, and they were not always nightmares.

"I appreciate you coming," Harry reiterated, and walked towards the phone box they would take into the Atrium, perforce drawing Adalrico with him. "Merlin knows this will be a thankless task otherwise."

Adalrico nodded to him. "And you want me to testify that your magic does not do harm to Marian?"

"If you would." Harry punched the number to let them into the Ministry and told the witch's voice their names and business, then turned around, leaning on the phone box while he waited for it to spit their badges out. Adalrico tried not to stare at the new silver hand cradling Harry's right elbow, and thought he succeeded. "The monitoring board has a new idea about how to thwart me, now that they can't bicker about who I bring to the meetings or how often we meet." He rolled his eyes. "The latest idea, which Marvin Gildgrace gave the Prophet an interview about, is that my magic could harm young children, either in the womb or younger than two years old. If you could testify that Marian received no ill effects even though I was with her when she was born, I'll be grateful."

Adalrico frowned. He had seen that interview, but it had seemed so ridiculous, just another wrinkle in the striving over the Grand Unified Theory, that he'd skimmed right past it. He thought now that he should have searched it for a mention of Harry's name. "Why would he think that?"

"Supposedly he has research—" Harry's tone made it plain what he thought of that research "—that wizard children have adapted to the presence of Lord-level wizards in the world, but not one as young as I am. Because I'm closer to a child in age myself, my magic can have

an adverse effect on them. Or something.” He waved his silver hand in the air. Watching closely, Adalrico thought he could see one of the fingers bend, but that might have been wishful thinking. “I must admit, I didn’t try to follow the convulsions of his argument once I realized he was targeting me, and why.” His mouth tightened in exasperation. “These Light wizards don’t give up.”

“Why bear with the monitoring board?” Adalrico asked, a question that had been bothering him. “You could dismiss them. You have the legal right to do so.”

Harry gave him a sharp glance. “I see that someone’s been talking behind my back,” he said, his eyelids dropping a bit. “I’ll have to talk, too.”

Adalrico let a faint, chill smile wreath his mouth. “Actually, Harry, no. I grew interested in the ways that the Ministry has dealt with unexpected Lords in the past myself, so I did my own research. And though none of them have been quite as unexpected as you were, they still should have treated you better. The threat of Voldemort, the fact that you went against Dumbledore, and your age frighten them, and make them think they can control you.”

Harry flushed. “My apologies, si—“

Adalrico raised his eyebrows.

Harry sighed and held out his flesh hand to catch the badges that dropped into them, handing Adalrico’s over. “Adalrico. I’m sorry. I should have realized that other people can do their own research, of course. But I had thought I’d demonstrated my resistance to control quite well already.”

“Light wizards never understand that until you embroider it on a flag and wave it in their faces,” Adalrico said scornfully. “They’ll try to drag you down, Harry, like hounds on a stag. Even the lesson of the dragon didn’t linger with them long. It has to be your own magic.” He felt his skin prickle and his hair lift as Harry’s magic rose a little, heightened by Harry’s outrage, and he sighed. The wild scent of a thunderstorm was all around him, and he appreciated it as he never

had. Of course, there were so few Lord-level wizards in the world to smell. He let his voice become a coaxing whisper. "Think of what you could do with it."

The smell dropped abruptly, and Harry gave him a faint, wry smile. "I have thought of it," he said. "And there are some uses I prefer not to put it to." He clipped his badge to his robe. "I don't think the Light wizards are the only ones manipulating me. Sir."

That was deliberate, not a slip of the tongue, and Adalrico accepted the message it gave gracefully. "At least I am honest about it," he said.

"Yes. I've never forgotten your honesty."

One look into Harry's eyes made it obvious he was remembering the night when Adalrico had told him about torturing Alba Starrise. Adalrico nearly swallowed his tongue, but forced himself into a gracious nod. "I'm known for that," he said.

Harry gave him a dangerous smile and paced past him into the phone box lift. Adalrico hastened to join him, and told himself he'd deserved that slap. Never forget what he is, and never stop watching. He changes so fast, and he's recently changed so much, that you'll need that simply to keep up with him.

They stepped out into the Atrium, and Harry nodded to a door at the far end. "That's where the monitoring board meets, that small room."

Adalrico concealed his disgust. Harry should have demanded—could have demanded, rather—both a larger room and one more convenient to his own schooling at Hogwarts. But he had got this far being humble, and it did seem that he had little use for trappings of rank, though Merlin knew why. He merely nodded and took a step forward.

It was swift. Adalrico saw the shadows stirring from the corner of his eye, and just managed to turn before something silver skimmed at him, curved and silent as one of the legendary death-blades. It caught him around the neck and seared his skin with a cold burn as it

And then the thought fell away, and turned into sheer fury, because they had Adalrico, and how could he worry about his own safety in the midst of that?

“What happened?” It was the Auror called Hope who spoke, her eyes wide, her fingers turning her wand in a nervous gesture.

Harry drew breath to explain, and someone laughed.

Harry turned, his silver hand rising in a flurry and flash of sparks. A man walked away from one of the fireplaces at the other end of the Atrium. He was putting something in his pocket—an Unspeakable artifact, Harry thought, what looked like a key made of diamond. That was the reason they hadn’t seen him before.

He immediately had six Auror wands trained at him, but he didn’t seem to notice, or care. His eyes were fixed on Harry’s face, and his smile was horrible, and he seemed to be waiting for something.

Recognition. And Harry knew him by his slightly dreamy, slightly mad eyes and his pale hair—knew him by the reflection of another man through him, a man who had looked like that. “Pharos Starrise,” he said, and had to close his eyes to keep from screaming. Was there no end to the foul, ash-starred ripples that could spread out from a single act of vengeance? Did no one but him ever get tired of claiming and shedding blood?

The thought of Cupressus Apollonis blazed in his mind like the edge of the sun in a solar eclipse. The scion of Light sinking into shadows. Pharos is whom he meant. A Light heir, a setting star. Damn it! I should have known.

“Yes,” said Pharos, his voice full of the sated sound that usually came to someone else when they had a good meal, or a good round of sex. “And he is gone, vates. He is gone where you will not find him.” He paused, and when Harry opened his eyes, Pharos’s gaze was fixed, glittering, on his left arm. “Or gone where you must follow,” Pharos whispered. “You swore a family alliance with the Bulstrodes, didn’t you? The scars will break open and bleed you to death if you do not

fulfill it. Oh, dear. Venturing into the Department of Mysteries, the heart of the Unspeakables' trap, in order to rescue a single ally. Of course that is something Harry vates would do."

And he smiled.

Draco had reached Harry's side by now, but Harry didn't look at him. Draco offered calm, and what he wanted was rage.

He let his magic travel through his eyes. With nothing more than his gaze, he froze Pharos into an awkward position, his neck twisted to the side, his chest ceasing to move, his triumphant smile becoming a rictus. Harry could feel trapped air brewing in Pharos's lungs, searching for a way out. One of the Aurors cleared his throat, and he knew the monitoring board would be watching him in silent horror, but he didn't care, he couldn't care.

"You are going to tell me everything you know about this, you fool," he told Pharos softly. "Or you'll cease to breathe."

Hope did step forward then. Harry turned a remote gaze on her, and she stopped, but stood her ground. "You can't treat a prisoner like that," she told Harry. "We have to question him. We have to put him in a cell and protect him from—those who might try to harm him." She hesitated for a long moment. "And that includes you, vates."

The air in Pharos's chest kicked and struggled like a trapped baby. Harry could feel the urge to keep on holding Pharos tight, to kill him like this, or to turn and rape his mind with Legilimency, get the information he was hiding.

And the small, nervous Auror, standing up for what she believed in, was the one to defeat him.

Harry twisted his silver hand, and Pharos collapsed to the floor, able to breathe again, his face almost blue. Hope hurried forward and bent over his shoulder, spelling his hands together behind him.

"You'll come and present evidence to the Minister, of course," she told Harry. She hesitated again, then said, "What is this about?"

“Pharos’s uncle had a twin sister,” Harry said distantly. He watched Pharos rub his throat and his neck, and tried to feel remorse at how close he had come to killing him. He could not. What he could feel was the screaming necessity to go after Adalrico, panting like the breath of a Grim in his ear, and Draco standing behind him, running one hand over his neck. “Pharos’s mother. She committed suicide after being rescued from Death Eaters. Augustus Starrise, the uncle, raised her sons, and searched obsessively for her killers. He found out last year that Mr. Bulstrode directed the torture. He challenged him to a duel, and they fought, and Augustus died. That should have been the end of it. It wasn’t.” He jerked his head at Pharos. “He has something to do with the Unspeakables, and their taking Mr. Bulstrode.”

“I do.” Pharos could talk again already. He was smiling at Harry. “I gave them information they need to trap you. In return, they promised it would be Bulstrode they took.” He laughed quietly. “And they’ve shared a few immunities with me, too. You won’t get what you want by questioning me with Veritaserum, or magic. I’m immune to them both.”

“Torture would do it,” Draco whispered into Harry’s ear.

Temptation—Harry crushed the temptation. He leaned back into Snape’s comforting presence, and rubbed his left arm, which was beginning to itch, and nodded to Hope. “I’ll want to speak with the Minister, of course.”

“Of course,” she murmured, and waved the other Aurors forward to help her take Pharos to the lifts.

Harry, staring blindly about, caught a glimpse of the monitoring board, and Aurora’s pale face, and smiled a smile that made a few of them flinch backwards. “The meting of the monitoring board is canceled for today, sirs, madams,” he said. “I hope you understand.” He made sure his tone said that he didn’t give a damn if they didn’t understand, and then followed the Aurors.

Anger and horror howled in his ears, combining with the itch on his left arm to urge him to rush ahead. He's your ally. He was endangered because he was with you, and for no other reason. The Unspeakables only wanted him to have you. How can you stand here? How can you not go and save him at once?

Necessity answered. Because my life is important to other people, too. And Pharos might know something about the traps the Unspeakables have set. It would be stupid to rush ahead when he could warn us.

Necessity, Harry decided, would have to shut up in a short while, if what he suspected was true and the Unspeakables had really made Pharos immune to questioning.

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Rufus watched Harry as he shut the door quietly behind him. Percy had preceded him into his office, and Rufus had let him go first to make the young man feel better, even though he hardly thought Harry would kill him over this news. Now Percy's nostrils were flared, and he scratched like mad along his shoulders, where Harry's magic would be making him itch.

It was strange, Rufus thought as he limped across the room, the focus of five pairs of eyes—Harry, Draco, and Snape had entered the office, and Mr. Bulstrode's wife and elder daughter had been summoned—how Harry could do nothing but sit casually in a chair in his office, and still be murderously angry. His magic went back and forth across the room like a stampede of scorpions, lashing the other way whenever it encountered a wall. It remained invisible so far, but Rufus thought that wouldn't last much longer when Harry learned what he had to say.

He sat down, and leaned forward, and gave them the news.

“Starrise is right. We can’t make him talk, not without bringing out knives and other—methods we prefer not to use.”

"Then bring them out," said Bulstrode's daughter. Millicent, that was her name. She leaned forward, her elbows gouging into the arms of her chair. Big girl, Rufus thought. Strong girl. Strong enough to make Percy reach nervously for his wand, at least. Rufus caught his eye and shook his head. "I want my father back. I'll use whatever I have to."

Rufus had not feared being killed. He had feared this, clash of Light principles against Dark. He said steadily, "That won't be possible, Miss Bulstrode. We don't torture our prisoners."

"Except when you accidentally let someone slip through the net," said Millicent, with an unpleasant twist of her lips. "Usually a Dark wizard suffering vengeance at the hands of the Light one, or a werewolf 'tripping' on the way into Tullianum. So 'accidentally' let someone through now."

"No," said Rufus. "I will not be a party to deliberate violation of another wizard's rights."

Millicent drew breath to speak, but it was Harry who answered, voice only mildly inquisitive. "So you couldn't get any information about the Department of Mysteries from him?" Around him, the scorpions marched. To be in the same room was becoming actively painful, but Rufus had endured worse. He replied.

"No. He hinted and taunted about 'chains,' and that was all he would say." He paused, studying Harry. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"So am I, Minister." Harry nodded. "Especially since I am going to have to invade the Department of Mysteries to get Adalrico back."

"No—" said Snape.

Harry flipped his left sleeve back. A fat drop of blood was just welling from a scar along his arm which Rufus thought was normally faint and pale, but had now turned pink as if newly inflicted. "I have no choice," he said, every word as heavy as a falling boulder. "The family alliance oath will name me traitor if I don't. And it would be right." He put the sleeve back. "That doesn't mean I'll go alone. I'll take anyone who's

willing to go with me, and that includes whichever of your Aurors you can spare, Minister.”

“You’ll have them,” Rufus promised, feeling a brief, dizzy spin of irony around him for a moment. He had never thought he would be lending some of his Aurors to rescue a former Death Eater he knew had escaped Azkaban on only the flimsiest of pretexts. If asked sixteen years ago, he would have preferred to let Adalrico Bulstrode rot where he was.

But that was before he knew what the Unspeakables did, before they rebelled against the Ministry, before he became Minister, before he decided that holding onto his principles was worth it even in the midst of crises. He would not let Pharos Starrise be tortured, and he would not let it happen to Adalrico Bulstrode, either.

Snape was talking quietly with Harry, Rufus saw when he looked up. The words grew more violent, and finally exploded into loudness when Harry pulled away from him and stood up, eyes polished green stone. The scorpions were visible now as great snakes, looped around Harry’s body, their hisses nearly drowning his words.

“I know they want me. I know this is a trap for me, more than Adalrico. I don’t care. I’m going. I have to. Adalrico is my friend and my ally, and I swore an oath.” He flicked a glance at Elfrida Bulstrode, who had sat pale and silent since she’d come into the office, and whose face was almost milky now. His voice gentled. “I’m sorry this happened to you, Mrs. Bulstrode. You can call whoever else you think might like to go with us, but it can’t take too long.”

“I know,” said Elfrida, and seemed to recover, bending over her wrist.

Rufus went to fetch his Aurors, and tighten the guard around Pharos. He had questioned the man himself, hoping the words of another Light wizard might get through to him. Nothing had helped. Pharos had only laughed at them, and remarked now and then that his vengeance was complete.

Perhaps he could not stop the Unspeakables from appearing in the middle of the room and spiriting him away, but Rufus was certainly going to try.

And he would be grateful for the chance to act on the, low cold anger rising in him now. The Stone had sworn an oath, and had broken it, probably due to some technicality in the laws of magic. The Unspeakables were rebelling against the Ministry's ideals of law, and against his direct control.

He would be more than happy to help defeat them.

Chapter Sixty-Five: An Island In the Seas of Time

It was pain.

Adalrico had thought he would be able to explain pain if someone asked him to. It was the curve of the blade, the touch of the poison, the cool-eyed gaze that evaluated when the acid had done enough. But now he knew he had only truly known pain through one end. His had been the hand that inflicted.

Now it was the hand that felt.

They had his hand in something that was eating his fingers away. The liquid swirled only a small amount as his hand flopped like a fish, but the metal band around his wrist held it there so it could not get away, and the liquid ate steadily, cleaning flesh from bone, tearing it open with tiny hooked teeth.

And beneath the skin and the meat and the bone, which it cracked and swallowed the marrow from, it fed on his magic.

Adalrico knew he would come forth from this time weakened. There was no way that he could not. But he wanted to know if he would come forth from it at all, if he would see his wife and his daughters again. The steady burn of the scar on his left arm, which the Unspeakables had set blazing like a beacon, said that Harry would come for him, and that, yes, he would walk in the sunlight again.

But the rational part of him, which still existed somewhere beyond all the screaming and all the pain, whispered that the Unspeakables wanted Harry to come. Adalrico was a prize; they could study his Dark Mark, and take his magic to guide their experiments. But Harry was a greater source of power still, and strange in ways that Adalrico only barely understood when Thomas tried to explain them, marked by the scar on his forehead. They would want him, could use him, more.

And Adalrico's capture was drawing him ahead, down and down into the darkness and the madness.

That was what he thought before the pain became all his world.

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Harry halted and lifted his head. They were in the corridor that led to the Department of Mysteries. They had come down from the lifts, and entered a hallway made of stone that looked like any other stone in the Ministry. But the soft, subtle vibrations of magic around them told Harry the truth.

He felt a sting of admiration through his fury. No wonder the Stone escaped for so long. This part of the Ministry isn't in the same world as the rest.

He could feel it, the shifting sideways that occurred between one step and the next, the short passage that the Stone had constructed—or caused to be constructed, since Harry was not sure it could grow hands—and used to join the Ministry and another, very similar place across the boundary. Harry saw the rest of them start as they felt it. Hawthorn and Snape, Draco and Narcissa, Elfrida and Millicent, Moody and Tonks, and the ten Aurors Rufus had been able to give him on such short notice, all knew the moment they stepped between, but they did not know what it meant.

“Be careful,” Harry said quietly to them. “Magic may not act here as we’re used to.”

Moody snorted at him, and his magical eye rolled around his head. Harry wondered if it was his imagination that it went further and rolled faster than normal. “And you think we needed a warning from you to figure that out, boy?”

Harry smiled a bit, reassured. Then the reassurance dropped away, and his rage flooded back. He saw Snape lean away from him with a slight flinch, pressing one hand to his forehead, and Draco lean nearer, sniffing rapturously. The others expressed various signs of discomfort.

“The Stone does expect us,” he said quietly. “Stay as close to me as you can. If I have to shield you, I won’t have time to spread it out.”

Not that they could help but stay close to him in the narrow corridor, Harry thought, as they made their way towards the black door at the far end. But beyond this hall, he knew they would find any number of odd rooms, and some of them would be large enough for the Stone to hit them from several directions at once.

He was alert. That was the only reason he heard them.

Insects streamed up the corridor, glinting silver as spiderweb in the dim light. Harry threw up his hands, and his first shield rose. But he was looking for signs of the curses Moody had taught him as they came, and saw the telltale red tinge in the same moment that Moody roared his warning.

“They’ll make the shield explode, boy! Down!”

Harry dropped his shield and fell to one knee, using the rest of his magic to press his allies flat and to reach out and slap the insects away with an invisible hand of pure force. Some of them careened away, spinning into the walls with a series of angry clicks and buzzes. Most of them, though, kept coming as though the invisible hand didn’t exist, their legs spreading and their jaws opening.

Harry had no idea what they would do if they touched his allies, and he had no intention of finding out, either. Someone whom he loved was already dying for him, hurting for him. He imagined the insects stinging Draco and Snape, or biting them, and a slow, burning power heaved itself up his throat.

It was familiar, but last time it had risen so quickly that Harry had had no time to study it. Now he did, as it cracked red wings from the shelter of his back and spread out through his eyes and ears and nose.

Go, he willed, thinking the word so loudly he would not be surprised if that gave Snape a headache, too. Do not be.

And they were not, the insects winking out of existence the way that Harry had made Greyback wink out of existence when he tried to

attack Draco. Harry rose to his feet in the ensuing silence and nodded back to Moody, the only one with an eye in position to see him.

“We can proceed,” he said. “They’re gone.”

“They’ll have others,” Moody predicted, but he stood, with a long, slow glance that Harry didn’t have time for. If the old Auror wanted to be afraid of him, then he could. Harry was going to rescue Adalrico. He strode forward, and Draco and Snape and Millicent, pressing at his shoulder, were anxious to follow.

Nothing else attacked them in the corridor. Harry touched the black door, and felt the throbbing magic beyond. He had his doubts, suddenly, about how accurate the maps of the Department of Mysteries Scrimgeour had given them would prove.

He took a deep breath, gave a grim smile as he remembered the Minister’s joke of “holding down the line”—in reality, preparing the rest of the Ministry for the moment when the worst might happen and Harry lost to the Stone—and then pushed the door open.

As it happened, the maps were accurate. In front of them was a room with a polished blue floor, so deep that Harry very nearly did think he was stepping into a pool. Candles flickered and sparked on the walls, blue as the ocean. Black doors lined the circular walls, and Harry thought that if he counted, there would probably be twelve of them.

“Behind me,” he said, the only warning he would give. His magical senses were extended around him like a lynx’s whiskers, but he could feel nothing lying in wait. Of course, that only made him warier, and certain there were traps somewhere beyond his reach. He paced forward, and heard the others clinging close to his shoulders and heels. Millicent was the only one who might have passed him, and Harry put out his hand to hold her back. She took one look into his face and understood.

When the last of them was through, the black door shut. Harry held his breath, wondering if it would work as Scrimgeour had told him—

Yes. The room began to turn, faster and then faster, until Harry had the urge to close his eyes so he wouldn't vomit. He held still, though, and watched as the doors danced. What they were doing to Adalrico would be far worse. If his ally could bear that, then Harry could bear this.

The revolutions slowed and stopped at last. Harry strode towards the door directly in front of him and reached out with his magic, pushing at it. One push, one pull, and the door swayed gently open. Harry shoved it back against the wall of the blue room with his magic, still not wanting to touch the wood. The door thumped loosely, not the kind of thing it would do if there were anyone hiding behind it. Beyond, in that room, Harry could see nothing but darkness.

Well. He could also hear something—whispers. And an invisible rope came coiling out of the room, grabbed him around the waist, and would have tugged him in if Harry hadn't braced his own strength and fought back. The magic retreated with a hiss. Harry let out his own breath and glanced over his shoulder.

"Do you know what this place is, Moody?" he whispered.

"That'll be the Death Room." Moody's magical eye was spinning like a top. "Nothing much in it but a veil, boy."

"A veil?" Harry turned and listened to the whispers again. Though it was hard to make them out, he was almost sure one of them was Sirius's voice, and another sounded like Sylarana's hiss, and he heard Fawkes's warble. He shuddered.

"A veil that leads to—some other place." Moody shook his head. "Nothing like the Stone in there, that I ever saw, and it's only a room for the dead." He watched Harry a moment, keenly, then spoke so sharply that Harry jumped. "Shut the door, boy!"

Harry realized he'd had one foot over the threshold. He tugged it back, took a deep breath, and pushed with his magic. It was hard. Something in him fought against the closing, lunging forward, thinking of the veil as a tattered curtain he could pass, to find peace and old friendship among the dead.

jeweled beaks. They hurtled out of the green-and-silver sky, and up from the gray cliff, coming from every direction and none; Draco's vision wouldn't stop spinning, as though his head had continued to fall, separate from the rest of his body.

He cast a curse, but heard a human scream of pain. Then talons made of diamond grazed his arm, and he flung himself in the direction of what he thought was the ground, clinging to the Stone. He felt it shift beneath him, and was reminded that he couldn't even trust what they stood on.

He closed his eyes and reached for the one gift that would avail him here, at least if the birds had minds. He leaped.

And he was within a cool, shallow puddle of thoughts, borne on heavy clanging bronze wings, aiming along a straight line between crooked, twisting mirrors, his beak open to rake across his mother's face.

He gained control and then crashed into another of the birds, bearing it away from Narcissa. He could see straight in this form, and he knew which direction was up and which was down, and he reoriented himself and spun away from the Stone, flapping his wings and crying. He could guide the others, if they only looked, but none of them could trust their eyes, and none of them could turn away from the battle; more birds were coming.

Draco dived through the bird's mind, looking for an answer. He refused to think there was a solution that his possession gift might not be able to discover. Yes, there was, and he would find it.

And there it was, as if his desire to find it had pulled it into being. In front of him, the puddle of the bird's mind boiled away, but connections led away from it, thin and strong as spiderweb, to the others' minds. The Stone could control one of them, and in so doing, control the flock, its awareness leaping between them all, like the Many hive. There was no central mind. It moved and changed as the Stone needed to change it.

Draco had never jumped so many minds so fast before.

Staring down the connections, an instant before he flung himself through them, he had the feeling that he had better learn.

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Harry landed in a twisted, oddly beautiful landscape. He crouched at an angle, holding his head up and setting his magic blazing furiously around him, to cleanse the air and steady the fluid in his ears so that he had at least a small sense of balance.

He stood in the middle of a black gravel path, the stones shifting softly under his feet as he moved them. They were cool to the touch of his flesh hand, burning coals to the touch of his silver one. Above him ran the gleaming underside of a silvery road, and around him on either side twisted gold and purple and more black and deep gray and palest white. He was in the middle of a mass of crazy catwalks, and the magic around him breathed deep tales of slumber, of Light power strong as that gathered at Midsummer and Dark magic strong as that gathered at Walpurgis.

“I am here.”

Harry turned sharply. A blocky gray shape drifted in front of him, an illusion or representation of the Stone.

Harry didn't lash out with his absorbere gift, though he longed to do so. He knew the Stone was immune to it, to all magic. But it was becoming apparent that it also manipulated magic with consummate skill.

"I want Adalrico back," he said levelly. "Give him to me, and give him back intact, and maybe I won't destroy you."

“You’re angry, aren’t you?” The Stone sounded interested, as if he were a scientific curiosity to be studied. The illusion angled and drifted up, passing through Harry’s head. He flinched, but felt nothing from it, no touch of cold or sharpness. It was simply there, and for the moment, it happened to be in the same place that his head was occupying.

“Of course I’m angry,” said Harry, and pulled his magic tight as chains around him, ready to lash out the moment they found a target. “You knew that about me. You took one of my allies so that I would come here. Give him back.”

His voice rattled several of the paths. The Stone responded in a tone of quiet amusement. "I knew that you would be furious, but not to this level." For a moment, it was silent, and Harry turned his head to watch the illusion. He half-wanted to ask where they were, but he knew, if he thought about it. They were in the paths he had briefly glimpsed last Midwinter, flying with the wild Dark, opening a gateway for the Light's gryphon through his body. These were the secrets so many Lords and Ladies had risked their lives to discover, the unconquered country into which they blended when their tasks were done or they couldn't withstand the call of Dark or Light any longer.

Even Harry could feel that call, nagging at the edge of his awareness, urging him to drop his barriers and embrace the magic that flowed around him. What could be better than being part of magic itself? He would have everything pleasant that he did now, and none of the trouble and vexations. He could stop making sacrifices. That was what he wanted, wasn't it? That was what he deserved, wasn't it?

Harry laughed to himself. Lily was a harder taskmaster than you are, and she taught me to deny pleasure, he told the paths, and they danced back from him like hurt deer.

"Yes," said the Stone suddenly. "You are caught outside of time now. And that means that I can finally find out where you stand in relation to time. I will discover all your secrets eventually, but this is the one I am most curious about." And it reached out and ripped him.

Harry screamed in pain, his arms rising to cover his head, his magic leaping out and falling back, defeated, from the Stone's absolute and utter protection against it.

But something else roared like an unleashed dragon, and this time the Stone was the one who screamed.

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Snape had closed his eyes immediately when he found his vision would not stop spinning. He had trained to blind-fighting in the Dark Lord's service, and at least the sounds the birds were making were fairly constant. He aimed his wand, and cast the Severing Curse, and heard wings and body separating and tumbling through the air, to land with an echoing crash. He did not dare open his eyes and gloat. He knelt down, to protect the person who lay nearest him—Millicent, he thought.

He did not dare think of Harry, either. He had to trust that Harry knew what he was doing, and would fight the Stone on the level, in the way, that none of them could. If he did not think that, then he might as well snap his wand and cast himself off the Stone's dizzying cliffs right then and there.

With his eyes shut and the confusion of sight cut off, though, he began to hear something else. It sounded like the throbbing engine of a Muggle car. It was in the rock beneath their feet—that was always beneath their feet, no matter what it looked like—and rising steadily to meet them.

Snape opened his Occlumency pools, shielding and shading and splitting his thoughts. He called up the rage that was brought only by the thought of Harry in danger, but he forced himself to think of something other than rescuing Harry while he did it. He spread his wandless magic out around them, winged and fanged and vicious, ready to act as a net and intercept what was rising from the Stone. He was the strongest of them but for Harry. It was his duty to protect the others.

He heard the birds' cries change suddenly, and nearly opened his eyes. Instead, though, he concentrated on the throbbing.

Near.

Nearer.

Nearer still.

And then the Stone tore open and tipped them down a chasm, and Snape spread his magic out like wings, unfurled and unleashed it, and commanded it: Hold.

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Harry did not understand what was happening. All around him was dazzling, white, shadowless brilliance, brighter than the brightest lightning, and it pierced his eyelids and showed him the changing and unchanging outline of the fingers he'd pressed over them. And the Stone screamed, and the dragon roared, and something caught him under the ankles and tipped him up to float in space.

The lightning died. Harry waited another few moments to open his eyes, though, certain he would be burned if he did.

When he saw again, he could only stare.

He floated in a new kind of dazzle, one that he thought had not banished but occluded the paths of Dark and Light. This was a white, scissor-shaped radiance, cradling him on one blade and the floating illusion of the Stone on the other. And spread out around him were coils.

Harry stared. One unfolded like honey rope from his forehead, and stretched behind him in a wide tunnel. When Harry turned his head, he could see the shape of a bird, frozen forever within it. Or were there many birds, hurrying back and forth between him and a distant point? Whichever one was true—and perhaps both were true at once—he needed no Thomas to tell him this was the representation of the link between him and Voldemort that the attack at Godric's Hollow had forged.

It was odd. He had imaged the tunnel as straight. Instead, it was angled, bent like an elbow. Almost Harry thought it missed something, some other angle that would have completed it and made it make sense, but he did not know what his own thoughts meant, and in any case other things soon snared his attention.

Under his feet drifted another honey rope, coiled in on itself. When Harry peered closely, he could see that running dogs marked it, and small, gray, shadowy figures that reminded him of Dementors.

The second prophecy that Trelawney made. It concerned Sirius's death, and my freeing of the Dementors.

Harry swallowed. He glanced back once more at the rope attached to his forehead—the first prophecy, the one that proclaimed the savior who would defeat the Dark Lord—and then turned to look for another. There should be one more, Trelawney's third riddling, the one Harry thought meant he would have to defeat two more Dark Lords.

And there it was, stretched all around him, lapping him about, draping the white scissor-blade, and joined and tangled with the first prophecy until Harry could see the bird's wings beating in it, too. He took a deep breath and shook his head, now having a good idea of the force that had roared and risen to defend him.

It had been Time itself. Harry was part of three prophecies at various points in his life, and prophecies were living creatures, capable of shifting, and two of them were still trying to happen. They would not have been pleased if the Stone had peeled back Time from around him. Harry was already caught in a maze of what had been and what would be. There was no place for an interfering Stone.

He started to chuckle, looking towards the illusion of the gray block again, which ached in bruise-colored ripples, and then his breath caught in his throat.

Beyond the Stone floated another rope, this one not honey-colored but dark green, shot through with glints of gold. On the coils, her eyes fixed on him, sat Death's black, slim hound shape.

A fourth prophecy was coming for him. And judging from the color, it was dark and Dark. Harry swallowed, and hoped fervently that it was the last one he would have to live through. He didn't fancy being the subject of three prophecies at once.

The last one I will have to live through. Is it so? Does that glimpse of Death mean my own death? And is it about the Horcruxes?

There was no way to tell from this distance, and no way to be certain of the prophecy until it arrived. Harry did not think that would be long. He wondered if he should be relieved—especially that the war with Voldemort would apparently not last long—or worried.

He glanced down at his own body as light from it caught his attention, and blinked. He had marks in this view of time, other than the scar on his forehead. The imprint of a phoenix glinted on him, the beak starting at his throat and the body continuing down his chest, and a golden-white trail whorled all over him. By glimpsing its endless bends, Harry thought he knew what it was. He had traveled the Maze, and the Maze was outside time in its own way, from another world even as the Stone was. It had branded him, and so had Fawkes's gift.

"You are interesting."

Harry looked swiftly back towards the Stone again. There was still pain in its voice, but even more awe.

"You are marked and scarred and tattered by time, wound in the future and traced with an immortal sacrifice, and through you Tom Riddle is marked and scarred and tattered by time," the Stone said. "And the third. Where is he? There is a place left in your aura, as if for a guest, and yet he is not with you."

"I don't know who you're talking about," said Harry, and started, quietly, to gather and to swing his magic.

"It does not matter," the Stone whispered. "I could spend centuries studying this, trying to grasp the odd coincidences that let this come about. Such a child of Time. And Time does not like me interfering with you. Well. I will not, not now. I will deliver you up to it, and study your life instead. Backward and forward, there is much material here, and you will teach me more if I let you go than if I bid you stay."

"Give me Adalrico," said Harry. The wonder had dulled his rage, but not restrained it, and now it orbited him as on a chain, ready to strike at where the Stone was vulnerable.

"I cannot," said the Stone. "He is being used. His magic is fueling our experiments. I will agree to a peace between us, and take no more of your allies, but it would be only a corpse that I gave back to you."

"Wrong answer," said Harry softly, and then he reached out, crashing his magic through the dream-world of Dark and Light, leaping and wrenching through the paths, striking straight for the Unspeakables and bidding them die.

He had done this before. Then, it had been beside a lake, and it had been a web he could not undo, and he had shouted the words in silence while tears streaked his face. Now he shouted them aloud, and behind the tide of his magic that struck the Unspeakables, his enemies, dead, he sent the absorbere gift.

"Adsulto cordis! Adsulto cordis! Adsulto cordis!"

They died of heart attacks, and their magic, which would ordinarily have gone back into experiments of the Stone's in death, sank down his gullet. Harry tugged on the magic, bearing it to him, letting the absorbere gift slam shut when it could hold no more and begin to digest. For the first time, he welcomed the magic to make himself stronger. If the Stone did not listen to him, if it chose to fight him rather than save those still dear to it, then he would need that power to survive the coming battle.

The Stone wailed, a pitiable noise. Harry doubted it truly cared for the Unspeakables, but they had belonged to it, and at least it sounded like a child mourning for lost toys.

He waited in silence, while his power expanded around him like a rippling pool, and he began to gather and swing it again, that crashing chain that was also a paired spear of destruction and magic-swallowing snake. He was stronger than he had been. It didn't make as much of a difference as he had expected. Swallowing magic, and saving it for himself instead of using it at once to benefit others, did

not instantly corrupt him and turn him into a monster. He wondered a little, now, that he could have thought it would.

He did not feel that bad about the Unspeakables' deaths, either. They had been the Stone's servants, sworn to it, bound to it, unutterably loyal. He could feel the dying echoes of their bonds inside him, and it made the slavery Voldemort enacted with the Dark Mark look like cords of twine. They would not have yielded to save their own lives, and they would not have given up Adalrico, and only their loss might convince the Stone to give his ally back.

They had been human. And he had killed them. Harry took a few deep breaths, watching the Stone more with the edges of his pool of magic than with his eyes. He would have to talk to Joseph when this was done and make sure he had not torn another wound in his soul. But this was battle, this was war, and if he could not handle it—either the killing of people who would never be anything but enemies, or the consideration of their humanity that would follow after it—then he should never have joined it.

"You may have him," the Stone whispered.

Harry did not sag with relief, because that would weaken the impression of uncaring strength he presented. "Intact in magic and in body," he insisted.

"Intact in magic and in body." The Stone tilted a corner towards him that Harry thought was the equivalent of a meek head-bow.

"And you will not interfere in my life again, or take any of my other allies."

"I already said I would not." The Stone sounded faintly surprised. "You are too fascinating."

"And you will leave the Ministry and the wizarding world alone."

The Stone took its time about answering, and Harry reached out to an Unspeakable and began to drain her without saying a word.

He sighed as he opened his eyes, then grunted in annoyance as one pair of talons sank deeper than it should have and the clamor of steel wings nearly deafened him. He sat up as the birds put him down, and found himself wrapped in his mother's embrace. The birds wheeled around them once, then divided; half the flock flew away across the dizzying land of mirrors, which was growing steadily less dizzying, while half hovered, guarding them. Draco hoped the first half had gone to fetch food and drink, which would be a good use of the "save them" command, and let his head sag back on his mother's neck.

“You saved us again,” she whispered into his ear.

"I think Professor Snape helped," said Draco, and blinked, turning his head. "Has there been a sign of Harry?"

Narcissa shook her head tightly.

All of them, from Draco to the weakest Auror, felt the enormous flare of magic a moment later.

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Harry gasped as something slammed into him, unseen. The dimension of Time flickered and faded, and Harry tumbled, no longer supported on the scissor-shaped blade, no longer able to see the phoenix imprint or the Maze's brand or the prophecies that coiled about him. He lifted his head, and saw himself on the black path once more, while above him the other roads raced in different directions. The illusion of the Stone had vanished with Time.

Who—

And then a shape dived at him, a glittering wave of power running at its back, and Harry knew which enemy of his was at home in this country of strange and secret paths, this country between the Dark and the Light. He began to swing his magic as a chain, ready to meet Falco again.

Chapter Sixty-Six: Defiance

Falco had a vision in his mind. The vision had settled there the moment he felt Harry wrenched from the wizarding world and deposited between the paths, the place where Falco himself had retreated to consider his options and learn the magic of the Dark in more detail. The problem might, after all, be solved without countless battles. If he could force an attack on Harry's greatest vulnerability, he might yet win.

He had flown among the paths while Harry talked with the Stone and wrapped himself in prophecy, gathering up the magic he would need to cloak his endeavor. The cloak was more important and harder to weave than the spell that would attack Harry's vulnerable chinks. Harry had to be convinced that Falco was really coming down on him with this gray wave of power.

And then he had it ready. Foam crested his shoulders, reaching around his wings, half a sea eagle's and half a thestral's; communing with the Dark had taught him the perils and the wonders of other kinds of shapeshifting.

He turned and came down on Harry with the wave behind him, sliding across the door between the worlds that the Stone was trying to open to send Harry home. The Stone could cut through the barriers by being what it was, immune to magic unless it accepted the touch of it. But Falco was stronger here still, given his courting of the greater powers, and he easily healed every small slit that the Stone opened.

Harry tumbled back into the world of the paths, and the prophecies retreated, and Time loosened its clutch on him.

And Falco swooped, with the wave hiding the weapon that hovered at his back like a knife concealed in a palm.

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Draco bit his lip, riding out the explosion, or collision, that had torn through him. His ears were ringing, and the blood dripping from the small gash on his arm had started to flow faster. He pulled away from

Narcissa as soon as it was safe and climbed to his feet, looking around.

He should be able to sense the direction Harry was in. At least, he felt as if he should be able to, given their connection through the joining ritual and the Portkey-bracelet. He laid his hand on the bracelet now and asked silently what Harry's condition was. Harry had enchanted the bracelet to let Draco know that, and also to bring him to his side if there weren't strong wards in the way.

In shock and pain, the bracelet's silent, inflectionless voice told Draco.

Draco shook his head, biting his lip again, and realized that most of the people gathered around him were watching him closely. The sole exception was Snape, who had pulled his magic back into his body and looked to be fighting between collapsing where he was and searching for Harry.

"Do you know where he is, Mr. Malfoy?" Hawthorn Parkinson's voice was terribly polite.

Millicent was less so. "Where's my father?"

"That, I don't know," said Draco absently. He twisted the bracelet on his wrist, and wondered if he should go to Harry. He wanted to, damn it, but there would almost certainly be wards in the way, both the Unspeakables' and the Stone's. He gave the rock beneath his foot a vicious kick, to which it responded not at all. "But I know that Harry is still alive, if in shock." He held up his wrist to show the gleam of gold when mouths opened to ask how he knew that. "I don't know if we can get to him, though." And he wasn't madly in love with the idea of leaping to Harry's side without knowing if he could help him. The last time he had done something like this, going into the Ministry when Dumbledore had captured Harry and subjected him to the Capto Horrifer spell, he had had the Black coin to insure he was prepared when he landed.

His mother seemed to sense the flow of his thoughts, and she gave a slight shake of her head to indicate that she thought Draco's pause a good one. "We must plan," she said. She took one more look around

the landscape. It had settled, Draco noted. Now they stood on a gray cliff, which might have been made of granite, above a land of cloudy green trees and silver streams. The bronze and steel birds swept around them, vigilantly watching for threats. There was no sign of gray-clad Unspeakables. "If there is a way that we can reach Harry, then we should take it. Otherwise, we should keep in mind that we do not know the laws of magic here, and Harry himself said that normal spells probably would not work."

"I might have an idea," said Draco slowly, and closed his eyes, slumping against Narcissa's ready arm as he leaped up into the minds of the hovering flock once more.

They welcomed him eagerly this time, their shallow pools of thoughts adapted to his touch, and Draco planted the idea of bearing the strange humans they needed to keep safe towards the explosion of magic they had sensed earlier. The birds did seem confused, for a moment, about where the explosion had come from—not surprising if they were in another world, Draco thought, or if Harry was. But Draco modified the idea of “towards” to be “as close as they could,” and the birds turned and descended again, clasping shoulders and arms with gentle talons.

Elfrida Bulstrode spoke as they rose into the air. Draco heard her, dizzily, through both metallic ears and human ones for a moment before he thought to retreat into his own head. “What are we going to do, Malfoy?”

“Come as close as we can to the source of Harry’s pain,” said Draco. “The wards or the prison or the world where he’s being held. That’s where I’ve told the birds to bear us.” He held up his hand, and the ring that Mrs. Parkinson had given him for his confirmation ritual as magical heir flashed and glimmered. She had sacrificed a part of her magic, making herself permanently weaker, for the sake of giving Draco an important and shining gift. That magic still crouched on the ring in the form of a small blue stone. “And I’ll use what power I need to so that I can burst through the wards or the walls, and rescue Harry.”

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Harry could feel the magic swelling around him, rising, moving oddly, shifting like the wave he saw at Falco's back. He had more power here than he had ever had, if he wished to use it. He had swallowed the magic from the Unspeakables, and the Dark and the Light were here—or, at least, curving through here—in all their might and could offer him gifts, and he did not have Voldemort pulling on his magic just now and drawing it towards him.

But Harry was determined to remember what the price of gifts from the Dark and the Light might be, and just because Voldemort was not yet a part of this battle did not mean he would stay out of it.

He moved backwards, and took a defensive stance, a shield of blades that appeared in front of him. He built the blades themselves of light, narrowed to such a thin edge that it would cut an eye out, and curled right about the ends of them in hilts of black wood. Blades were a poor defense against water, but Falco's magic was not truly water, and the blades were not truly blades. All were only imagined representatives of what could be, here, and Harry had finally, finally stepped into a place in his own mind where he had cleverness and more to spare.

The wave fell on the blades, Falco sweeping past just under it and adding another hammer blow of strength to follow behind.

The blades quivered, and cracked, and quaked. And Harry dropped the center out of them and imagined them unfolding, rising, as a spiderweb, the edges of light become tearing spokes or spider legs, snaring Falco's magic and dragging it towards him and his gullet.

Falco let out a cry Harry told himself was surprise, or fear. It was better than thinking it was mere shock and irritation that would fade in a moment.

Harry didn't want to try swallowing Falco's magic, not yet, when the absorbere gift had not quite finished digesting the last meal he'd given it. He swung the captured power around instead, casting his net away into the maze of Dark and Light paths, giving Falco's magic to whatever wanted to eat it. He heard a howl somewhere far away, and

something nameless in both the realms most mortal wizards understood scurried to retrieve the prize.

Falco rose a second time, the glittering form of a spread-winged sea eagle in the midst of light. Harry juggled balls of power behind him, letting them rest in his silver hand for moments at a time, and thought of Quidditch.

He studied Falco in the meanwhile. This was the first chance he'd had to evaluate the nature of his enemy's magic. He knew Voldemort's power, vicious and fanged and bladed. He knew Snape's magic, like a tamer version of Voldemort's, and without as much of the swallowed poison. He knew Draco's, quick and adaptable and flexible, and Lucius's dusty marble tomb, and Millicent's, a stone that might dance in an earthquake at any moment.

Falco's was different. Chilly as the light he mantled himself in, deep as deep water, it revealed barely any of its owner's personality. Harry blinked. Given his lessons with Jing-Xi, he hadn't believed this possible. Even a small manifestation of his magic would show him to those who knew him, and Jing-Xi had explained that a Lord or Lady with a longer life was likely to develop a ferocious soul that imprinted itself on the smallest signs of his or her power.

He studied Falco a bit more, and then he understood. This was Falco's personality. Chilly, deep, high, brooding. He saw himself as above humanity. He understood very little of what they did. His long sleeps and retreats into the paths that surrounded them now were part of that, but more came from a refusal to understand that things had changed. Six hundred years ago, when he had been born, this kind of height above the world might have been the ideal for Lords and Ladies, and they would have interfered with mortals only to adjust the "balance" among competing forms of magic.

But even wizards changed. Even Lords and Ladies died. And Falco had locked himself into a mode that, if it did not permit dying, also did not permit living. He tricked the Dark and the Light, and in so doing, he had forgotten a good deal about tricking—and living with—others.

Harry comprehended a great deal then that he hadn't understood before.

He was ready when that chill light poured at him, trying to push him onto a golden path, trying to open his mouth and force a Declaration to the Light past his lips. He cast the balls like balls in Quidditch, the Snitch darting away from his right hand and towards Falco, a bright and fast thing all feathers and chirrups and hurrying summer morning. From his silver hand came the Quaffle, a vision of mild gentleness, of compassion, of spring.

Behind them, moving almost too fast to be seen, were the Bludgers, and they slammed into Falco, one and then another, cracking his light, letting him know how stupid he had been, causing his world to shatter into ringing shards around him.

Falco faltered and fell. Harry let the cold light wash over him, and met it with the naked strength of his will. He would not Declare. He found it wrong. And he had performed too much Dark magic to be considered Light. Would the Light really want a tainted prize like him?

Falco's attack, calculated on a misjudgment of Harry's character, trembled and fell after its master. Harry faced him triumphantly.

And Falco cast the spell he'd been hiding.

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He lifted his head, did Lord Voldemort, when he felt the clash of them far away, the Dark Lord that was to be and the young one, his heir, the child of his hatred, who would feel the bite of his hatred as the bite of an ice scorpion very, very soon.

He listened to them, and chuckled.

"My lord?"

That was his Indigena, the one who had cleaved to his side, the one who came when called, the one he felt almost tender towards. He stroked her hair with long fingers, and watched through the snake's

eyes as it slithered quickly across the grass above the burrow, seeking for some signs of the new Dark Lord's magic in the air. That new Dark Lord had prepared a refuge for them. Why he should wish to do so was not yet clear, and while he almost thought he could take his word for it, did Lord Voldemort, he would be foolish to walk into a trap the enemy was preparing.

"Lord Falco and Lord Harry are fighting," he said. "And it is clear which one shall win." He cocked his head as a spell leaped to him across the distance, a spell not many people knew any more, a working of weaving and silver chain that he, swift and great, had only learned for himself in Egypt, in a city scorned by most European wizards as haunted. "Though the contest may yet be interesting," he added.

He knew his Indigena would have a baffled expression on her face. He did not mind. He liked confusing her. He petted her hair again, and sniffed the smell of roses.

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Falco lay in place, as if weak and wounded, and watched his spell do its work, wrapping around Harry's mind in a dazzle of chain. Harry bowed his head, rubbing his brow with his silver hand, seeming to know that something was wrong and yet not realizing what it was. He should not have known. Falco had been careful of that. And now he was casting his second spell, as opposed to his second weaving of pure power, during the encounter, reaching out and drawing one of them closer, the nameless creatures who lurked between Dark and Light and had never received any distinguishing notice from wizards because they merited none. They could not affect the balance, normally. They were scavengers who ran the paths and ate what scraps of nourishment fell their way.

One was about to play a part in determining the fate of the British wizarding world. Falco wondered if it knew, then dismissed the thought. Nameless, these creatures were also mindless.

The thing wandered nearer, sniffing forlornly after the scraps of magic. It looked like a hyena, but without the head, leaving only the hunched

shoulders to bend down and press a flat, blunt hole like a nose against the paths. The paws sparkled with diamond claws, and the wire sticking up from its back flagged like a tail. It was a living thing, a magical creature, and that was the only requirement it needed to serve the part it must play.

Harry saw it. The spell moved deep in his eyes, changing him. He lifted his silver hand. Falco hid his annoyance. It would have been more symbolic had Harry used his wand, but he had forgotten that nearly all of Harry's magic was wandless now, that he had adapted that well to this level of power. Falco debated building in an urge to use his wand when he rewound the control this would give him over Harry, and then dismissed the notion. Best not to press too far. Restoring the balance would be quite enough for him. He had no reason to attend to all the minor performances that might accompany the grand gestures.

The nameless thing squared its shoulders and turned to face Harry. Falco wondered if it knew it was about to suffer. It might. He had read, somewhere, that they did. He shook his head. One could read and forget many books in six hundred years.

The end of the silver chain sparked in his hand, winding through Harry's mind, giving him access Harry did not realize he had. Like a certain class of perception-changing spell Albus had used against Harry, it could conceal its own presence from the minds of those it affected, and erase any notion of itself that popped up.

In a moment, the spell would force Harry to use compulsion against the nameless thing.

Using compulsion, he would cease to be vates.

And then he would have no reason not to Declare, and because he knew what horrors Dark Lords were, he would choose Light. Falco would Declare Dark, and fight him, and most likely die, given the prophecy that bound Harry and Tom. And then Harry would go on to fight Tom, and probably kill both of them in the bargain. And Britain would be without any Lords again, which was probably the best condition for her.

Falco was not afraid to die. He was afraid of accidents.

But this spell, Harry could do nothing against, because he did not know about it.

Age and cunning will defeat youth and stupidity every time, he congratulated himself.

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Draco had not known if he would be able to sense the best place to break through the barriers when they came to it. As it was, he didn't have to worry about that. Every sense in him stood up and screamed. It took him a long moment to realize that he was, in fact, feeling what the flock felt; they knew the moment they had fulfilled their task and taken him to the point where he was parallel to that collision of magic.

Draco did take a moment to wonder, as he studied the scene in front of him, how his possession gift had changed. He had never done that much research into its origins, not really. He suspected that it came from the mingling of his Malfoy empathy with the Black compulsion gift, but if that was so, it should not have changed further; it had no reason to do so, nothing else in him to blend with. He would have to read up on it—

Assuming that both he and Harry survived the encounter in the Department of Mysteries today.

He shook his head, and thought more about the immediate problem and what he would have to do to solve it. The flock had carried them to a place in midair, which looked like a huge, polished mirror. Draco could see more green trees and silver streams and boundless gray sky on the other side of it, and the distant reflection of the Stone. The problem was, this place in the Department of Mysteries being what it was, he couldn't say that this was a mirror. It might actually be that this room continued, only in perfect reversal this time, even down to the presence of a second Stone. Perhaps this was only as close as the birds could bear them, a midpoint and not a gate or a wall.

But he would not rescue Harry if he were fretting himself about philosophical questions.

He held up his ring and began to call on the magic that resided in it. In a way, he hated to use Hawthorn's gift for this; the practical Malfoy part of him whispered to husband the magic, to keep it for a point where he could really get a use out of it instead of using it because there was no better weapon available.

But the Black part of him asked what the magic should be for, if not for rescuing the man he loved? And the Malfoy part of him—or, at least, the child of a father who had once valued his wife and son beyond price—had no answer for that.

Draco smiled grimly. There were times he could feel the two sides of himself, Malfoy and Black, Lucius and Narcissa, fighting out the balance of his soul, but he intended to be more than two battling sides. He was in the midst of chaos now, weaving what he could, making the best decisions he knew how while still in ignorance of the outcome, and that was a talent all his own.

"Draco, wait."

His mother's hand clamped on his wrist from across the air between them. Draco concealed the impulse to snap at her, and turned a gaze that he hoped was coldly courteous on her instead. Narcissa gazed back, more than a match for him, and he lowered his eyes and nodded, indicating his willingness to listen to what she had to say.

"Could you command the birds to break through the barrier?" Narcissa gestured at the steel vulture that held her, and flapped large wings stronger and sturdier, Draco had to concede, than the glass the mirror was made of. "They may have carried us this far only because you told them to, but they would, perhaps, break open the barrier if you told them to, in turn." She gave the polished air a mistrustful glance.

"I don't know if I could," Draco retorted. "They guarded us and carried us so far because of one command that I gave them: to keep us safe. If I changed that, and told them to break through the mirror now, they

could drop us, or smash us into shards as they went through wards that would not harm them.” He gestured in a wide circle with his left hand. “And I don’t see any ground where we could count on safely landing if they released us. And Professor Snape is exhausted and could not catch us in time.”

“If I wove a net for us?”

Draco lifted an eyebrow. “Try.”

Narcissa waved her wand. A spell that Draco recognized as a net which had wrapped around most of Malfoy Manor the summer he had thought he was a dragon in a human body and tried to fly off the roof spread out around them. It was glittering silver, thick and strong and more easily able to bear weight than the desperate construction of Professor Snape’s magic.

It had nothing to attach to, however, and the moment it formed it began to fall. Draco watched it drift downward in silence, and then turned an eloquent look on his mother. Narcissa only inclined her head.

“Do what you must,” she said. “There was a time I would not have hesitated, were Lucius on the other side of wards like that.”

Draco nodded, and turned his attention back to his ring, ignoring the muttering of some of the rest of them. Millicent was worried about her father, and Professor Snape was worried about Harry, and Moody was worried about Draco’s ability to lead a rescue like this. None of that signified. He laid his will like an extra hand across the small blue stone, and tapped into the freely given magic. He knew exactly what he wanted to do. He wanted to break through the mirror, step through it or smash it or rend it apart like cloth—whatever must be done to stop it from separating him and Harry—and then reach Harry’s side.

He visualized the desire very clearly in his mind, and started to reach for his wand to help the effect along with an incantation.

Then the world broke.

Why in the world would a vates use compulsion?

He screamed, and dived into his mind, redirecting his magic, telling it to lay open his thoughts and show him everything he was thinking.

His vision spun dizzily, as Legilimency and more ordinary power, including the swallowed magic of the Unspeakables, sprang to do as he wished. Harry had a brief, burning moment to wonder why more Lords and Ladies didn't do this to themselves.

He stood above a map of blue and green and red, and swept his gaze through guilt and memories and the remnants of sated physical needs, and his gaze fixed on the alien silvery chain twining through his thoughts, and he reached in and yanked it out.

Pain leaped through him, but it was nothing compared to what he would have felt had he compelled the headless creature to go away. He flung off the silver chain, and tattered it, and shook his head impatiently.

Then he turned on Falco.

The Quaffle, Snitch, and Bludgers he had constructed were shades of an idea. If Falco was cold and saw himself as above humanity, then Harry could best battle him by introducing warmth and the idea of what it meant to be human. He could bring him back from his cold distance and force him to flee if he saw, face-to-face, what he was not.

That had been what Harry wanted to do when he had both some compassion for Falco and an idea of finesse left, however.

Fuck finesse.

He called forth his magic, winding it up into a massive wave of his own, bound to his hands, flesh and silver, and then flung it forward, hitting Falco with a flood of pure, raw wildness and strength.

You don't want to be human? You don't have a choice.

He plunged Falco into his own memories, his own emotions: the intense drama of the trial, the memories of a child cutting himself with curses and only slowly training himself out of pain, the graveyard and the wheeling, screaming moment when he lost his hand, the dizzy joy of speeding along on a broom, what it was like to have magic that manifested itself as creativity and hot jungle life. He showed him what it was like to be Harry Potter, Harry vates, and how he had already lived more in sixteen and a half short years of life—ten of those spent under a bondage he had not realized was bondage—than Falco had in six centuries. He showed him again, and again, and again, and again.

Falco fled.

Harry had not expected that. He suddenly had no target to pour his magic against. He tugged it back. It came reluctantly, shaking its head like a wild horse, and Harry caught sight of Falco crouched at a distance among the paths, his wings almost scraping a golden one, watching him with intense fear.

Harry started to snap his magic forward again, but he paused. Something hovered behind Falco, reaching out to trail its claws teasingly down his back. Harry thought it one of the nameless creatures that lived between the paths at first, but in that case, Falco would have been aware of it, and he didn't seem to be. Harry stared, trying to understand, and Falco stared back, obviously not knowing the cause of his reprieve but intent on absorbing as much information as he could about Harry while it lasted.

The thing trailed its claws, and looked at Harry, and smiled. And then, just for a moment, it changed from a vague dragon into a shape like a chimera, like the one that had come at Midwinter—or so Draco had told him, later—for his Declaration.

This is the Dark.

And it hovered over Falco, and it spread its wings, and it cradled him as if he were one of its children, but Harry did not sense the kinship from it that he felt towards himself, or the wilder, more vicious, more

predatory communion it had with Voldemort. It seemed to treasure his ignorance instead, to treat him as a victim. If Falco was going to be the next Dark Lord, he did not know his new allegiance well at all.

Harry's eyes widened.

And what if that is it? What if the power the Dark Lord knows not, in this case, is the Dark? Falco is entirely ignorant of its nature. He's never Declared for it before, never fought for it, and it hides itself from him and laughs at him.

Harry felt his heart beating harder and harder. He reminded himself that the wild Dark was unpredictable, and it might change its mind and decide to welcome Falco between now and the time when he Declared.

But if he could creature a situation where the wild Dark might destroy Falco—

And if Falco Declared on Walpurgis, or fought Harry on Walpurgis, the time of the next great rising of the Dark, and Harry could not see him waiting until Midwinter with the way he had attacked now—

Then Harry might be able to consciously fulfill the prophecy for the first time.

He laughed aloud, and Falco's eyes narrowed. Harry leaped forward, his magic running around him like a whole herd of wild horses, shaking their heads and tossing their manes and tails. He rushed at Falco. He thought he knew how to destroy him, but if he could do it here and now, then he wouldn't complain, and he didn't intend to wait.

He raised his magic, and the foundations of the Ministry shook, and one path shredded like light and showed Draco hovering on the other side of it, in the talons of a metallic bird, staring at him.

Harry winked at him. His anger turned to joy, and he sent another flood of life after Falco.

Falco vanished.

Apparated, or bent time the way that Scrimgeour had told Harry he could—Harry did not know, was not sure, did not care. Hope had joined him, and it sang and sang and sang until he could barely hear the voice of the Stone underneath it.

“I will keep my promises,” the gray illusion said, as it appeared hovering beside Harry. “You are the most fascinating creature I have yet met with. Studying your relationship to prophecy alone could keep me happy for half a year.” Harry saw one corner tilt in that gesture like a meek head-bow again. “Step through the slit. Your ally awaits you, intact as you requested him to be.”

Harry inclined his head back to the Stone. He was no less angry with it, not really, and he did not entirely expect it to keep its promises not to hurt him or his allies, or the Ministry and the wizarding world. But if it broke them, then he could rise against it and hurt it very badly through taking its Unspeakables and its experiments away.

He had the magic, the power, to do that, and while there were some things he would need to be wary of doing with that power and always would—killing others and draining their magic, for example—he could use it.

There are, he thought, thinking of the monitoring board, going to be some changes.

And then he turned and stepped through the slit in the paths into what was no longer empty air but a solid, sturdy corridor that led towards a black door opening on the circular blue room, and the birds were gone, and his allies stood about him alive and unharmed, and Adalrico lay senseless at his feet, and Draco was in his arms, breathing against him, heart beating.

Chapter Sixty-Seven: Minds, Scarred and Unscarred

Draco closed his eyes, and held Harry, and said nothing. He could feel cloth sliding under his hands, and cold silver along his spine—cold enough to feel even through the robe, as though Harry had placed his hand in the dark spaces between the stars before he returned. He felt a beating heart.

And, because of who he was, he felt the pressure and the presence of the stone in the ring on his finger, still a bit of solidified magic he had not quite managed to use before Harry broke open the barriers between the dream-world and the room in the Department of Mysteries.

He might love Harry as much for sparing him from using that magic as he might for the power he'd just exuded, he thought.

Harry finally stepped away from Draco with a small shake of his head. "Later?" he murmured.

He—ah. Draco had to hide his chuckle as he caught sight of a flush that wasn't embarrassment or dying worry or exultation on Harry's cheeks. He nodded and let his fingers rest against the side of Harry's neck before he moved to greet Snape. Snape did not touch him. That did not matter. Draco could see the air around him humming with his relief, his respect, his gratitude.

And Draco could add his own to it, as he leaned back and folded his arms and watched Harry move from person to person, soothing with words, sometimes the touch of a hand, and occasionally a flicker of magic, if it seemed that the wizard or witch in question needed to feel that. He also darted quick glances from the corner of his eye at Mr. Bulstrode, so that by the time Adalrico stirred and Harry dropped into a fluid kneel beside him, Draco had the feeling that Harry knew quite as much about his physical condition as if he had checked him over all the time.

"Mr. Bulstrode," Harry said, and then corrected himself, with a faint smile on his lips, at one of those jokes Draco hated because he hadn't shared. "Adalrico. What hurts the most?"

“My hand.” Adalrico rolled on one side and held it out. Harry grasped and studied it. Draco, who had come up behind him—when had he done that?—scanned it narrowly. He could see dark, blue, fleshy bruises along the fingers, but he wasn’t sure what might have happened.

Harry's free hand trembled, though, as he reached out and rested it on Adalrico's forehead. "Transfigured flesh," he said quietly. "You'll have the best care in the wizarding world, Adalrico. I mean it."

The man nodded and closed his eyes. Millicent was kneeling down beside him, and her hand clasped his arm as if it wouldn't move any time soon. Draco couldn't blame her. He knew how he would have felt if it were Narcissa in the clutch of the Unspeakables.

Harry stood, moving aside like a dancer when Elfrida came to watch her husband, and considered him for a moment more. Then he nodded, and turned, and seemed surprised to find himself chest-to-chest with Draco.

He smiled, though, instead of retreating as he would have once, and leaned in to whisper, “Still not quite private enough yet for what I want to do.”

Draco raised his eyebrows, stifled his own flush, and nodded. He could wait. There was no reason to hurry.

Harry's heart was beating.

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Millicent cast the spell lurking in her wand—at least, it felt as if it were lurking there and not on her lips, and had been since the moment she heard of her father’s capture. The magic spread over Adalrico’s body in a soft, sparking net, popping gold and red before it vanished into his joints and elbows. Millicent stroked his forearm above the Dark Mark and watched.

Wisps of blue rose to the surface of his fingers and chest and hair a moment later, like steam off food. Millicent studied them, while her parents had a quiet reunion in the middle of the floor.

Pain, the blue wisps spoke of, and by the depth of their color, she could guess how severe the pain had been.

This was the color of the bruises on Adalrico's fingers. It spoke of suffering that was never going to heal.

Millicent's hand spasmed open, but she tucked it beneath his shoulder, so that no one else could see, and heaved, to get him to his feet. Adalrico cocked his head to look at her, and curved one heavy brow in amusement.

"Everyone else is leaving," Millicent pointed out. Harry and Draco had moved over to another black wood door in the walls, guided by an arrow of Harry's magic that would—Millicent hoped—lead them to the correct portal. "Unless you really want to stay here and spend some more time with the Unspeakables, then I suggest—"

Her voice clipped itself off at the look on her father's face.

"Millicent," said Adalrico softly. "Do not joke about this. Promise me that you will never joke."

Millicent strove to swallow several times before she could. Then she whispered, "I promise it."

Adalrico inclined his head in a fragile nod, then stood. He leaned on Elfrida as she led him towards the door, and that was the first time Millicent had ever seen that happen. The Stone and the Unspeakables might have given Adalrico back with the damage undone, but that was not the same as healing it, and Merlin knew what he had seen and felt along with suffered.

And he had come through alive, and without a resentful glance towards Harry.

Could I have done as much?

Millicent did not know. She hadn't had time to feel resentment towards Harry. She had followed Harry's summons to the Ministry through the phoenix song communication spell when her father was taken, and then she had wanted him back, and then she had prepared to fight Unspeakables, and then she had fought birds instead, and then she had knelt beside her father. Emotions other than sheer determination had existed on the far side of when I have him back.

But now she had her father back, and he did not seem to blame Harry. He seemed to feel it was a reasonable price to pay for the alliance, and that because Harry had come and rescued him, that obliterated any blame that might arise from the fact that the Unspeakables had only taken him in the first place because he was Harry's ally.

Could I have done as much?

And the thought repeated in her head, and repeated, like the roar of surf, because someday her father would be dead, and she needed to stand at Harry's side, and she did not know whether she could maintain that kind of blameless trust in a powerful wizard—that kind of trust in the mechanics of power, for that matter, which accepted the risks of becoming strong enough to attract attention.

But she had the feeling that she would need to learn to do so, because neither the commitment nor the danger was going away.

Millicent slid the wand back into the holster on the side of her belt and followed her parents.

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Rufus was waiting for them.

He hadn't gone with them, of course. What might happen in the Department of Mysteries was too strange to fathom, and on the off chance that it killed Harry, Rufus had needed to remain above in the Ministry and prepare for the worst. If he had gone down and been killed—

Rufus shook his head. He did not know who would have been Minister. Amelia Bones's run of power was done. Some members of the Wizengamot might jostle each other for the Minister's office, but Rufus personally thought Elder Juniper was the most likely to win. And given the delicate state of affairs between the Ministry and the werewolves, and Juniper's dislike of them, that might have been disastrous.

It was not the first time he had had to stay behind and think of life and the future while people he valued went to face death in the present. But perhaps he had never been so glad as he was now to see those people come back into the light, not unharmed, not safe, but alive.

He held out his hand on instinct when Harry stepped out of the lift into the Atrium. Harry gave him a quick glad glance, and clasped it back. Rufus narrowed his eyes at the thrum of power through his palm.

He has grown stronger again.

It would mean many dangerous things for the Ministry, but not as many dangerous things as an Unspeakable victory would have meant, or an illusion of the Stone advancing with slow majesty up the corridors. Rufus would have accepted the growth of Harry's magic for that reason alone.

And he could accept it for another reason, he thought, as he turned to welcome his Aurors back into the Ministry and congratulate them on their courage—disgruntled though some of them looked. The part of him that wanted to follow Harry was howling like a hound on the scent of blood. Harry had defied those who insisted that a powerful sixteen-year-old would destroy the wizarding world. He had done things that Rufus was not sure Albus Dumbledore in the height of his power could have done.

Rufus had felt the blast of magic that soared up through the Ministry. It could have meant so many things, including that Harry had simply grown tired of the way the wizarding world worked and decided to claim it.

And yet, he had not only not done so, he looked more interested in chivvyng his allies out of the lifts than demanding a parade and concessions from Rufus.

Just as he thought that, Harry glanced over his shoulder and locked eyes with him. "I do trust that Pharos Starrise will be arrested and tried before the Wizengamot?" he asked, in the tone of a gentle suggestion.

"He freely admitted conspiracy with the Unspeakables," Rufus told him. "At the least there will be a trial."

Harry nodded, and turned away. Adalrico Bulstrode himself was coming out of the lift now, leaning on the arms of his wife and daughter. He stumbled. For a moment, Rufus caught a glimpse of the Dark Mark under his sleeve.

We have all changed.

Some of us more than others.

He sent the returned Aurors, quietly, to Pharos's cell, to inform him that he was under arrest. He paused, then also told them to tell him his victim had come back alive. The Auror he told that to, Emily Frogswallow, widened her eyes in delight that was almost unholy.

"And that doesn't fall under the definition of torture, sir?" she asked, as if hoping that it would, but also aware that Rufus wouldn't allow her to say anything if it did qualify.

"It falls under the definition of getting what he deserves," said Rufus.

Frogswallow practically curtsied and danced away up the hall, arguing with her partner about who would get to tell Starrise the truth.

Rufus smiled tightly, and faced Harry. "I need to speak with you about the political situation with the Stone and the Unspeakables," he murmured.

sacrifice, sir," he said, with a small smile. "It's passive, after all. And I did what I had to do in the Department of Mysteries. Anyone else in my place and with my power and with my mindset would have done as much."

Scrimgeour opened his mouth as if to ask a question, then shook his head and let the words die unborn. "And what will happen if the Unspeakables and the Stone do slip out of control again?"

"Summon me." Harry shrugged. "There are other things about me the Stone never mentioned knowing. I think I can raise a mystery that will make it interested again, and that makes it abandon its games for the game of watching."

Scrimgeour sighed. "So nothing is settled."

"Nothing directly, sir. It may still break its promises. But it may also be more faithful than any human. And even humans can break oaths, or act against common sense," Harry added, thinking of Lucius, thinking of Pharos. "We will have to wait and see what it does."

Scrimgeour nodded, as if he didn't like it but couldn't think of anything better. "You realize that some Light wizards may take the opportunity to act against you?" he asked, eyeing Harry. "For poisoning the mind of the scion of a noble and ancient family, or whatever other grievance they can dream up? Not because they believe it, but because they believe their political power may be lessened by this?"

Harry laughed. "I should be used to people creating accusations out of thin air about me, sir. This time, though, I mean to give the accusations weight. I will tell whoever asks that Pharos Starrise's means of taking vengeance were foul and ridiculous. The ritual his uncle used should have settled the debt between the two families, as it was meant to. At the least, Pharos could have challenged Adalrico to a formal duel, instead of giving him into the custody of men and women who are enemies of all sane in the wizarding world. The Light's honor has broken. They won't get far by pressing against me." He sat up a little straighter. "And I mean to break the monitoring board."

“Do you.” Scrimgeour’s voice was neutral.

Harry gave him a direct look. “Yes. They’ve given me what they can. I haven’t turned on them and snapped at them. Anyone who wants to listen knows that our few meetings have been riven by factionalism on both sides, not my refusing to listen to their reasonable recommendations and running off on my own, like the child they pretend I am. And I don’t really think the Wizengamot would end Gloriana Griffinsnest’s trial now, would they?”

Scrimgeour slowly shook his head. “No. We’ve questioned her, and she’s admitted to a few unsolved murders of werewolves as well as to Claudia’s. So she must be tried, if not convicted.”

“Good.” Harry stretched his arms above his head and gave a little shake. “I’m going to do what I should have done in the first place: talk to my Light allies about making Light wizards trust me and giving them a voice in Dark-dominated politics. Not the monitoring board. Not anymore.”

“You do realize—” And Scrimgeour flushed, and stopped.

“Sir?”

Scrimgeour appeared to hold a private argument with himself. Harry leaned forward, attentive.

“I wish,” said Scrimgeour at last, his tone striving for dignified and not making it, “to be there when you talk to Aurora Whitestag and tell her about the dissolution of the monitoring board.”

Grinning, Harry stood and extended his hand. He noticed only a moment later that it was his silver one, but he didn’t take it back. He would make the cold metal flesh in the end. “Come with me then, sir. We don’t have far to walk.”

Scrimgeour’s hand touched his. Harry knew that only by sight, since he couldn’t feel anything through the silver yet. But that would change. He would make sure that would change.

And, really, seeing the expression on Aurora's face ought to be enough to make up for a disappointment in the matter of his metallic hand. If some things were not yet right in the world, a good many other things were.

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Aurora had felt the shifting of magic, as though one foundation stone had just replaced another at the root of the world. She was wary, and she did not scurry home as the others had. Still she sat in the small room just inside the Atrium, hands clasped in her lap, and waited. Griselda Marchbanks sat with her.

She half-started when the door opened and Harry stepped inside. He had a windblown look about his features, as if he had run across the tops of a cliff and let the desert touch him. The look he turned on her was cool and remote. As Snape and young Malfoy and even the Minister crowded inside, Aurora couldn't take her eyes away, couldn't see who else he had brought to witness her humiliation. She knew the words he would speak before he spoke them.

"The monitoring board is dissolved," he said.

And she had to pull herself together, and fling into the teeth of that uncaring coolness: "Why?"

"I need it no longer," said Harry, with a slight shrug. "And it did me more harm than good, and next to nothing to secure political power for Light wizards." He paused, and, for some reason, stared over his shoulder at his Malfoy before he turned back to her. "And, technically, it was illegal in the first place. The Ministry doesn't deal that way with Lord-level wizards."

"Laws can be changed." Aurora did not look away, did not weep. "And you were the one who offered the compromise, Harry."

"Didn't know the laws then." He looked utterly unapologetic, despite the self-condemnation in his tone. "Should have. And since then, people who have always cared for me and protected me looked them

up, and told me this was illegal. So. There's no reason to maintain it any more."

"You are still very young," Aurora said softly.

"And I've always survived with help from friends," said Harry. He leaned back against Draco Malfoy, a blatant gesture of disrespect, considering that Draco was so much younger than Aurora, and had no political standing of his own. His smirk widened when the Malfoy boy stroked his shoulder, as if he didn't know or could not see the implications of the gesture marking him as a pet. "I don't think I need an entire monitoring board half-composed of enemies helping me. It's a waste of your very valuable time and attention that could be better turned elsewhere."

Aurora lowered her eyes, and gave a slow nod. She had felt that burst of magic. She knew, from the exultation on Madam Marchbanks's face, that the rest of the wizarding world already on Harry's side was apt to think of this as part of his vates duties, and that others would swing towards him. Harry did command Light families who could stir the loyalties of others. Opalline might be despised for not participating in wars, but they could summon allies and pull strings that no one else could. Gloryflower had soared back into prominence with Laura Gloryflower's intention of protecting her werewolf niece. Marchbanks followed him now. There would be others who would be glad to take Aurora's place even if the monitoring board continued to exist, and Harry would welcome them as his friends.

That they would be his friends, and therefore less likely to criticize him and teach him that there were limitations even to magic, would seem irrelevant to both Harry and those who might replace her.

Aurora raised her eyes to Harry's face as slowly as she had lowered them. She had never found out what had changed his soul, but she knew now it had been the death knell for her ambitions. She could never hope to gain the advantage over him that she had wanted, never hope to put the leash around his neck that she had been convinced had to go there, for the good of the world. And that would remain true even if they patched up their differences and he accepted

her as a friend someday. He was not in the mood to listen to advisers now. He would meet them, at best, on an equal footing.

And he was not interested in the words of a woman who had had two of her children destroyed by him. That much was plain. Aurora wondered if he remembered Heloise and Abelard's names.

She would retreat. She could not win, and so she would not destroy herself trying. She would retire gracefully from the field. She would help the Light achieve what prominence it could in Britain, because the Dark was either mad or intent on following a sixteen-year-old. She would dance as much as she could in the unoccupied areas, not engaging with Harry.

And if what she feared happened and all the great dream came tumbling down, she would attempt to fight and preserve what she could, instead of dooming it all to die with Harry because she had trusted him too much with its protection.

"Thank you for explaining, vates," she said. "I will leave now. You know my name, if you should decide that you wish to ask for my help."

She saw the Minister's face freeze from the corner of his eye. Aurora laughed, but only inside, and it was a tired and bitter laugh. Had he expected her to crumple? She saw no reason to do so. If her grief had been overwhelming, she would have, but she was tired of such a long and pointless struggle that would only end up raising another Lord. Britain had chosen to follow magical power instead of wisdom. Let them deal with it. It might even work out well for them.

She saw Draco Malfoy's eyes narrow as if studying her, and Severus Snape lean forward like a hound on the scent. Aurora avoided his gaze. She had begun studying Occlumency since that first disastrous meeting, but she did not think her barriers could stand up to his probing, yet.

Instead, she looked at Harry, interested, even now, to see how he took this.

She found his eyes peering back at her with bright, piercing confidence, the confidence of a hawk who would not believe he could not strike the target. Aurora concealed her pity behind a nod and a smile, and walked past him.

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Lucius leaned back and closed his eyes.

Narcissa had written him a letter describing the events in the Ministry. It was a short letter, and listed only points of action, without telling what she felt about them, or what Draco felt. She probably assumed he could imagine what they thought.

There was one exception to that: the last sentence.

Do you not wish, now, that you had kept your loyalty to a man who would rescue you if the Unspeakables ever captured you?

“Ah, Narcissa,” Lucius whispered to the fire, and stood. “If you understood that I have more to fear from Harry capturing me.”

He accepted the truth, now. He was alone. He had hoped to work his way back into Harry’s good graces by careful handling. He had hoped that with enough time and enough obedient behavior—and a commitment to that obedient behavior—Harry might want him as an ally again. And he had believed that such a thing might work. Slowly, slowly, the new path dropped into place exceeding fine.

His last hope had always been that, if Harry did discover what he had done, he might pause, hesitate, forgive—for Draco’s sake if not Lucius’s.

But now that hope had flashed into flames, too. The Harry who had come forth from the Department of Mysteries, who had killed without flinching, might, possibly, forgive, but Lucius would not trust his life to chance.

It was time to consider plans of self-preservation, plans of making sure that he could survive Harry’s wrath when it appeared, not plans

that were geared towards keeping him from ever discovering Lucius's secrets. Lucius was a master at these. They had served him well when the Dark Lord fell. Those like Bellatrix, who had believed he would never fall, had been caught alive in the trap of their own assumptions. Lucius did not intend to be.

It was time for plans of escape.

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Hawthorn scattered some more dust into the potion, then, with a curse, cast a stabilizing spell on the cauldron and stepped away with a deep half-cry. She could not concentrate on even a possible cure for lycanthropy right now, when so many thoughts were brewing around in her head.

She stalked to the window from which she could see her garden. The memorial of pansies, hawthorn, and dragonsbane usually calmed her.

Today, it only made her think of how Indigena Yaxley had come to her garden, summoned Connor Potter there—Hawthorn believed it was ultimately her summoning, and not Rosier's—and taunted her with her life. And she had not taunted Hawthorn with memories of Pansy's death, either. She barely seemed to remember what they were to each other. She had gone on living her life when Pansy died, in spite of the curses that had almost killed her.

And now there seemed to be next to no way of killing her, if all of Hawthorn's curses had bounced off.

She reached out and murmured a spell that grew her fingernails into spikes, sufficiently sharp and thin to be different from werewolf claws. She drew them down the glass of the window, carving long, parallel patterns that shrieked the air apart.

Hawthorn could not allow Pansy's killer to live. At the same time, she knew Harry would not take vengeance on her, and that seemed to be the one sure method of making her die. And an execution held no appeal for her. She wanted Indigena to die from vengeance, not justice.

Most of the time, she could give up vengeance. She had done so for Claudia, though that wound still pulled at her like the loss of a limb, sometimes. She had done so for Fergus Opalline, dead in battle. She had done so for Dragonsbane; he went to his death willingly, and she had known.

But for Pansy...

Let me have this. Let me have this one scarlet, blood-soaked, screaming thing.

And she would not rely on curses in battle again. Harry had accepted that because she had done it in hot blood. But that was no way of insuring Indigena Yaxley's death. Hawthorn had to do it slowly, in cold blood, had to stand over her enemy's body and make sure it no longer breathed or spoke or grew.

She wanted that.

And she was unsure if she could achieve that.

She stood there, silent now, save for the noise as she drew frost-patterns on the glass, over and over again.

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There was an old ritual that should have answered.

Adalrico thought of the ritual as he sat in front of the fire, his hand stretched out towards the heat. He was not trying to grip anything with it yet. Millicent and Elfrida had cast healing spells on it until he told them to stop. Marian was currently curled in his lap, asleep, the only company he could tolerate because she did not know or comprehend what had happened to her father.

There was an old ritual that would have been inflicted on anyone who tried to take vengeance when a feud was settled. It would have let Adalrico summon Augustus's ghost and confront him with Pharos's actions. He would have been horrified, and he would have turned his

back on his nephew, condemning them to meet no more. Adalrico knew it. Starrise had been a stubborn old bastard, but he had been, every inch, a child of the Light pureblood rituals. Invoking revenge when it should have been done with was a violation of those rituals, and turning to help outside the family made it doubly vile.

He lifted his hand and flexed the fingers. As Harry had said, it was Transfigured flesh. He could use the hand again, someday, perhaps as soon as a month from now. He could do a great many things, actually. But he would still have the memory of the acid wringing the muscle and the magic from the bone.

There was an old ritual he should have been able to use on Pharos Starrise, instead of turning him over to the Ministry's justice.

Adalrico Bulstrode sat before the fire, and the desire for vengeance stirred in him with a bright and high and deadly song.

Intermission: Among the Nightshade and Belladonna

“And does he yet suspect you?”

Snape could not help a smile. He kept his face lowered, so that the other Death Eaters would not see it, but his Lord would know it was there. And he would forgive Snape for it, when he heard what Snape had to say.

“No, my lord,” he murmured. “I managed to convince him that I disappeared on the night of your return to save the Potter brat, and arrived only a moment too late. He did not take that well, but I gave him no hook to hang his suspicions on. His Legilimency is not as great as your own.” He was offering flattery, but only if Voldemort truly wanted to look for flattery. He was better at Legilimency than Dumbledore had ever been. Part of what it required was a will dedicated to dominating other minds, to finding out their secrets. And Dumbledore, fool that he was when he could have been great, still held himself back from that desire. It had grown worse since Harry died on the altar-stone in the graveyard, and Remus Lupin had followed him. It was as if he believed that no evil would happen in the wizarding world if he did no evil.

Snape entertained the vision of Dumbledore stepping aside when the Dark Lord walked into the school, because he could think of nothing else to do. That was easily enough to put him on the verge of chuckling.

“And your other absences, my dear Severus?” One cold white hand came down and cupped his cheek, and Voldemort’s power sang around him, treading the ground with a heavy step that made the Death Eaters standing on their feet sway. Snape did not pretend to understand all the complexities of that magic any more than he pretended to understand the whole of the Dark Arts, but from what he knew, some of the Potter brat’s power had been wound with his Lord’s own. Not until Harry had died had that magic returned home to his Lord.

“He believes I am still spying for him and the Order of the Phoenix, my lord,” he murmured.

Voldemort laughed, and most of the other Death Eaters in the room laughed with him. Snape did not. For one thing, it was not a joke they understood, nor had any right to, and he did not share his amusements with lesser mortals.

He listened carefully to the peals of laughter, though, picking among them. Bellatrix was only laughing because it was her Lord, and she did what he did. Lucius was laughing because he had judged the moment was opportune to do so. Like Snape, he had broken and returned to the fold after all, now that he knew Harry was dead and there was no one to protect him against his Lord's rage. After maiming him permanently and claiming one night with Narcissa, Voldemort had decided his debt was paid sufficiently to let him back into the Death Eaters, but Lucius was always at the forefront of attacks now, and had to do what he could to curry favor with the others.

Walden Macnair's laugh was not as assured. Snape kept his face blank as he knelt there, and never glanced in Macnair's direction.

The man was the most likely to betray them of any of Voldemort's servants, he thought. He was a coward, of late, as if his joy at killing dangerous magical beasts for thirteen years had somehow translated itself into a reluctance to kill humans. And he sometimes listened with a slightly open mouth to Snape's descriptions of the Order of the Phoenix, and with wide and shining eyes.

I will be watching him.

"Describe Connor Potter," said Voldemort suddenly, stopping his laugh and leaving the other Death Eaters floundering. "What have they done with him, now that his brother is dead?"

"Put him into training, my lord, behind privacy wards that only his parents have the keys to," Snape murmured. "They believe that he must meet you and fight you soon, and that he is unprepared."

"Of course he is," said the Dark Lord. "I killed his brother, the true Boy-Who-Lived." He paused. "Do not think I have forgotten what you

did for me, Severus, or the last bit of true pleasure I received from the boy's death."

Snape smiled. For a moment, as he had stooped over Harry, he had pretended this had all been a ploy, Lupin a necessary sacrifice, and he had been going to rescue Harry and take him home. He had waited to see the hope shine, and then he had withered it when he took the disemboweling knife from his Lord's hand.

"I wish you to discover the secret of these wards, Severus, and bring the Potter boy to me," said the Dark Lord.

Snape had known that would be his mission. He could have protested, said that Dumbledore would never trust him, but he knew that made no difference. He must make Dumbledore trust him again, and get around the fool's desires to see Snape as somehow responsible for Harry's death.

He was, of course. He sat in the same room with the parents of the boy he had helped kill and they stared at him with resentment, but not the hatred they would have to express if they knew. It amused him enormously. Snape was enjoying this form of revenge on James Potter more than he had ever thought he would.

"Of course, my Lord," he murmured, and made to stand.

"A moment, Severus."

Snape knelt back down at once, and stayed there in silence as the Dark Lord sent all the other Death Eaters away. They were in the Riddle house, a rather obvious meeting place. But Snape had convinced Dumbledore that the Dark Lord hated his Muggle ancestors so much he would never use their home for either a meeting or a hiding place, and subtle Dark magic helped to reinforce that impression the one time the Order of the Phoenix came to search it. Lily Potter had walked right through a room where Nagini lay curled on a pillow watching her. Laughter roared in Snape's throat at the thought.

"I have an unusual request for you," Voldemort continued when they were alone.

“My lord?”

For a moment, that pale hand came out and caressed his face again. Then it caught his chin, and tilted it up. Snape went obediently with it. The Dark Lord spread out his Legilimency, and Snape opened his barriers wide before it. He had no secrets from this man he had served so faithfully for nearly twenty years.

The Dark Lord moved through his mind like a mist with fangs, then nodded and stepped out of it. “You still think of yourself by your last name,” he said. “I would like you to begin to think of yourself by your first.”

Snape nodded. Of course he would do so, and not ask why, if his Lord did not want him to ask why—

“You wish to know why, Severus.” He was amused. Of course he was. Snape could feel his Lord’s magic breathing over his skin like the cool wind from the lungs of some ice dragon.

“I do, my lord.”

“And I do not yet wish to tell you.” The gentle, caressing hand on his throat turned sharp as barbs. When he wished, the Dark Lord could use wandless magic to grow claws that rivaled any werewolf’s. “You will know when I deem you ready to know, Severus.”

“Of course, my Lord.” And then he rose to his feet and Apparated, because he could feel the push in his mind for him to do so. Voldemort’s eyes were on his back the whole time, like burning coals, like watching werewolves.

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“Severus! Come in, my boy.”

Snape had no sneer on his lips when he came into the office of Albus Dumbledore, because he never did. He bowed and took his place across the desk from him, holding a shadow of sympathy in his face. He was thinking how different it was when Albus called him by his first name than when the Dark Lord did so. Voldemort, of course, knew his life, as he knew the lives of all his Death Eaters, and knew why he didn't like the name. To Albus Dumbledore, the informality it allowed him mattered far more than what Snape wanted to be called.

"What did you learn?" The man had offered him nothing to either eat or drink before he began, showing just how anxious he was.

Snape began his entirely contrived report, which attributed motives to Death Eaters they did not have and prompted the Order of the Phoenix to watch for attacks that would never happen, his eyes not moving from Albus Dumbledore's face in the meanwhile. The man was pathetic. The news of Harry's death, and thus the breaking of the prophecy, had broken him. Now they were searching frantically for someone to be the "elder" to Connor Potter. So far, Snape knew, they had found no one. Two good candidates had mysteriously died in their sleep.

Albus nodded at every third word he said, his eyes filled with old shadows. Snape felt bile like acid creep up his throat.

Merlin, how he hated this man.

He had wanted to use him to steer a path through the darkness, to show Snape his own soul. Instead, Albus had assumed that he had simply "won" Snape back from the darkness, and paraded him as a prize before the other members of the Order of the Phoenix. And, of course, he had briefly allowed Snape to go to Azkaban, simply so that he could reward his "true" allegiance later when he testified that Snape had been their loyal spy all along.

A month with Dementors, because Albus Dumbledore wanted to make himself seem more heroic.

And, on top of that, he would not use his power. At one point, he could have prevented Tom Riddle's rise. At one point, he could have

made Harry Potter into the weapon that would have stopped the Dark Lord's second rise. And he had refused, and hesitated, and hid behind prophecies, and refused.

It was no wonder that Snape preferred to serve another master. It was no wonder that he wanted revenge on Albus Dumbledore—revenge hot as a knife, cold as the hand of an Inferius, sweet as clustered honey on the tongue.

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Snape slowly opened his eyes. Another dream, and it tattered and flew across his mind like clouds across the moon. He thought he had been dreaming about Albus, but that was not unusual. The man still appeared in his thoughts, both past and present.

Nothing hurt this time; he had finally learned to sleep with his arms neatly folded on his chest again, instead of tangling himself in the blankets as he thrashed from a memory he had no wish to relive. He stood, and paced across the room to check on his purple poison. He had mostly made it as deadly as he could, and now amused himself with seeing how painful he might make it.

In the end, he thought it would be very painful, and would kill just quickly enough to give the person who ingested it hope that she could be saved.

Snape sighed as he cast yet another stabilizing spell on the cauldron. There were times he dearly wished Remus Lupin were here.

Interlude: The Liberator's Seventh Letter

February 17th, 1997

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

Please forgive me for not writing in so long. It took me a long time to understand what had happened to me, and even longer to realize to what use it can be put. So. I will commit these words to parchment now, while my family is looking for political opportunities for the Light and not paying as much attention to me.

I began having strange dreams about Falco not long after I wrote my last letter to you. I put it down to nightmares at first, then to anxiety and worries. But soon I was dreaming of things I had never seen, and will never see, as I am a witch of only moderate power. He walked the paths of Dark and Light, and learned the disciplines of necromancy in a way that made me uneasy. He did not intend to commit to being a necromancer, but he is learning of death. And he is studying what Lord Voldemort did in his first rise, and his abbreviated second.

I fear that he is trying to become a Dark Lord. Why he should have changed his allegiance so spectacularly is still open to speculation. He speaks in the dreams, and I hear him, but I cannot read his mind.

I was at a loss, at first, how I came by this information. Then I realized that I had a scar on my hand that I did not remember having. I had paid no attention to it at first, since I often wake with scars that I do not remember having when I went to sleep, but this one throbbed when I dreamed of Falco.

I confronted my mother. She looked away from me, but at last she admitted that I had the scar from grasping at a mirror.

A mirror! The time I spent with the glass in which my parents could see Falco has affected me, I think. Why, who can say? My parents and my siblings are all more powerful than I am. Perhaps the glass connected with me as the weakest of the family. Perhaps it sensed my intense interest in Falco and grafted on to that. Perhaps it reacted

to the less-than-perfect devotion to the Light I can sometimes feel in myself.

Whatever its reason, I have a connection to Falco through the dreams.

From these dreams, I can tell you that:

He is studying Lord Voldemort's tactics so closely that he may imitate them. I beg you, Minister, listen closely for reports of new Death Eaters, even if the reports seem false and self-contradictory at first.

He no longer appears as interested in the magic of time as he once was. He is now more fascinated with the magic of death. He has wrested secrets that only trained necromancers usually know, including the knowledge of raising spirits and sending them to possess the minds of the living.

He visits the coasts and other waterways in Britain often.

He does not understand the wild Dark. He often communes with it as if it were a pet, or a deeply stupid child. I am not sure if this can be used against him, since he seems intent on Declaring to the Dark anyway, but it may help.

I will pass on more information as it becomes certain, Minister. May the shadows shelter you.

Yours,

The Liberator.

Chapter Sixty-Eight: The Advantages of Research

"I did think of one, Harry."

Harry jumped and glanced up from writing the letter to Tony Flotsam, a Muggleborn wizard who'd asked for more information on house elves. By an effort of will, he didn't scatter ink across the parchment, but it was only by an effort of will. "Peter? You thought of another time when my parents defied Dumbledore?" He put the ink and parchment carefully on the table, and glanced towards the front of the library. Madam Pince was scolding two third-year Hufflepuffs for throwing books at each other, luckily, and couldn't overhear them, but Harry cast a privacy ward around the table anyway. "Did it have to do with the ethics of sacrifice?"

Peter took a chair and nodded. "It did."

Harry studied him in concern. His voice drooped, and so did his face, pasty white and with nasty dark circles standing out from beneath his eyes. "Peter, are you all right? Have you been sleeping well?"

A moment passed during which Peter seemed to be trying to decide what he wanted to say. In the end, he gave Harry no more than another nod. "Yes." He sat up. "The memory came back to me when I was trying to remember Defense Against the Dark Arts spells we'd studied in our sixth year that might be appropriate for my class. James had a certain—power in the Dark Arts, you know. They fascinated him. I think that was why he broke when he realized that he'd used an Unforgivable on someone else for ten minutes and enjoyed it."

Peter's voice was full of shards of memories, and Harry didn't particularly want to linger on James's torture of the Lestranges. He nodded, to encourage him along.

"He didn't have as much of a problem with the Dark Arts in school as he did later, when he'd seen them used in the war," Peter continued, musing. "He found a spell that would target purebloods."

Harry frowned. "How?" Thomas's research had shown that even pureblood families often produced wizards and witches of considerably lesser power than they ought to have done, if purity of blood guaranteed that magic was more likely to choose them—which it wasn't, but which was what most of the European families had believed for years.

"It worked on belief," said Peter. "It would attack someone who wasn't a pureblood by birth but believed he was. Or someone who knew the pureblood customs and worked to make himself fit in, like you."

I suppose some spells could work like that. Harry had rarely studied them. Magics of the minds, and visions, and actual spells that would work on the bodies of enemies, had been more of interest to him. "And did he use it?"

Peter shook his head. "He was more fascinated with the theory behind it than what it did. All it would have done was give someone stinging boils. So he read more in the book where he'd discovered it, and then more books. And he brought the books to Lily and showed them to her. She was tempted. She had infused so many of Dumbledore's beliefs by that point that she was ready to fight in the First War. But she hadn't yet come to think, the way she did later, that she had to use only Light spells or she was damned. So she was willing to wield Dark Arts against her enemies."

Harry nodded. He could see how such a willingness would have been a violation of both the ethics Dumbledore taught his mother and the kind Falco believed in. One didn't have to Declare Light, since the Light needed enemies to struggle against, but one couldn't hang in between and use both kinds of magic. Harry sometimes thought that was what irritated Falco most about him, other than his sheer ability to change the wizarding world. "And did they use them?"

"On a few birds we captured." Peter grimaced. "Curses that would have got them expelled if any of us betrayed them. None of us did, of course. We were all fascinated—all but Remus, but I think you know that. And Sirius showed us some of what his compulsive power could do. He took control of James's body and marched him around like a

puppet. It exhausted him, but he was competing with James, wanting to show that he could do everything James could.

“That panicked James. He burned the books and, I think, paid the library for them. And he declared that he wasn’t going to use Dark magic ever again. Lily followed him; I think he convinced her that time, or she thought about it and decided that a Light witch had no need for those kinds of spells.” A shadow passed over Peter’s face. “Of course, she would use spells that violated the ancient definitions of Light, like free will, if the spell was technically Light.”

“The phoenix web,” murmured Harry, thinking how much easier his life would have been if his mother were a bit more technical and exacting in her definitions.

Peter nodded.

Harry sighed the temptation to wallow in self-pity away. He had dealt with his past as well as he was ever going to deal with it. Its major value now was how it could help him in the war, and learning that his parents had defied Dumbledore, and Falco through him, at least two times moved them closer to being the first two Dark Lords in the prophecy. “Thank you, Peter. Please let me know if you remember any other major defiances.”

Peter nodded and stood, yawning.

“And get some sleep!” Harry called as he walked towards the door of the library. He turned back to his letter to Flotsam, concealing a yawn of his own. He should probably feel like a hypocrite, he knew, dispensing advice to Peter he wasn’t disposed to take himself. In this case, though, he’d been up late turning the advice Joseph had given him about the Unspeakables over in his mind. Harry had gone to him almost the moment he’d come back from the Department of Mysteries, wanting to know if Joseph thought what he had done, killing people and draining their magic in order to break the Stone, was right.

Joseph’s gentle questions, as usual, had led him down the right path.

If you had the situation to face over again, would you do it, Harry?

Harry had hesitated, but nodded. "I'd like to find some second road, but I don't think there's a second road to take. The Stone values its servants. It doesn't value much of anything else except what I'm unwilling to give up, like my magic, and werewolves to perform its experiments on, and my allies to drain for their magical power."

What would you want done, if you were in the position of having a family member drained and killed by an enemy?

“I’d want to know why it happened. What motive he had for doing it. If his reasons were good ones.” Harry stared at his clasped hands. The silver one felt too cool against his flesh one, even now, but small sparkling trails of warmth moved up it.

Perhaps you should talk to Dionysus Hornblower, then. He may know how much contact Unspeakables still have with their families. Perhaps the Stone forbids them to meet a sibling or parent again when they swear to it, but perhaps not. In fact, learning more about these enemies in general would serve you well.

Harry knew Joseph had been speaking of what might happen should the Stone decide to interfere in the war again. He, though, had considered it a valuable reminder of what the human cost of war might be.

He rubbed at his eyes and picked up the quill. He'd finish the letter, work on his Defense Against the Dark Arts homework for an hour, and then spend an hour on Horcruxes. And then he could go back to their bedroom, and Draco. The thought of that made him smile.

I'm living, I think. At least, I'm trying.

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“Zacharias. You wanted to speak with me?”

Had it not been unwise to do so, Zacharias would have smiled. His mother's voice sounded so much like Hermione's. But he knew

neither woman would appreciate the comparison, so he would not give offense.

Even though you are about to give offense in another way, far more deeply.

He shook those thoughts aside and sat up. "Yes, Mother." Miriam Smith's face floated in the green flames of the fireplace in the Hufflepuff common room. As Zacharias was of age by his family's standards, he'd been allowed to use a privacy spell so that others could see him but not hear what he was saying. He felt some curious glances on the back of his neck now, especially from Susan Bones, who appeared more interested in the politics of the wizarding world than Zacharias had ever seen her.

He let out a slow breath. He didn't need to be thinking of Susan right now. He needed to be thinking of his mother, and Hermione.

"What about?" Miriam asked a moment later. Zacharias concealed his start well, he hoped. It had been his intention to wait and draw his mother out, but he hadn't done it consciously, not this time. He'd simply let his thoughts distract him to the point where he hadn't paid attention to the workings of her face.

It could be fatal, he thought, eyes locked on the impatient lines around his mother's mouth, to do that again.

"Something political," he responded. "Something important. Unless you're doing something more important still, Mother, and then I am sorry to have disturbed you and shall wait respectfully until you contact me to speak to you again."

Miriam studied him in silence. Zacharias could feel the balance weighing and tipping in her mind. She was currently engaged in trying to make sure that those Light purebloods who opposed the Grand Unified Theory still had a voice in the Ministry. She would not want to be taken away from it, and she would doubt whether her son's preoccupations concerned anything more important than that.

But, on the other hand, Zacharias was not in the habit of contacting her on a whim.

She nodded, and Zacharias could almost hear her deciding that she would grant him a few minutes of speech. "What is it?"

All his graceful words deserted him. He had planned a few metaphors, vague mountain passes by which he might approach the subject, and now it was upon him, and he could do nothing but gesture towards it.

Unless he walked the direct path.

The direct path would not have annoyed Hermione. She would have thanked him, probably, for saying what was on his mind without prevarication. But his mother and Hermione were two very different people on the surface, however deep the similarities might run.

"Zacharias?"

And he was taken off guard again. That was a grave enough sin for him to deserve whatever punishment his mother might think appropriate for a direct statement. So Zacharias spoke, without trying to clothe it in a sapphire-colored cloak.

"I believe the Grand Unified Theory is right, Mother."

Miriam did not explode. That had never been her way, of course. Bursts of temper were like stars going supernova: all they did was produce a great deal of heat and light and die quickly. More was gained by waiting, by thinking, and by obeying standards of honor and coolness that the Light held dear.

Zacharias thought for a moment that the Dark held them dear, too, and then pushed the thought away. He was not to blame for what his ancestors had valued. The only thing he could affect, ultimately, was his own actions. He knew what would happen when he was announced as a believer in the Grand Unified Theory. Some Light purebloods would shun him, and his influence would lessen.

He had thought, and thought hard, in the last few weeks if announcing his beliefs was worth that. In the end, he could only conclude that it was. The last straw had been reading the words of Muggleborns on the subject, and the words of purebloods, and realizing that the Dark and Light wizards of old families sounded more like each other than the Light ones sounded like the Muggleborns who had come seeking sanctuary in their world.

Zacharias was Light. He was that before he was pureblood, or Hufflepuff, or a descendant of Helga Hufflepuff, or the heir of the Smith family. If he could only have kept those distinctions by doing something Dark, he would not have. And it disgusted him to think he might have more in common with Lucius Malfoy than Hermione.

"You must have received some convincing evidence," his mother said at last. She had no emotion in her voice at all. That was a very bad sign. Still, Zacharias did not close his eyes.

"I did, Mother," he said. Quiet, respectful, rolling with the blows, baring his belly and his throat to her if she wanted to tear them out. In the end, he was beyond her reach, just like Hermione was. The mistake of the Light purebloods lay in thinking this might go away if they clamored enough. And if it had been only a refutation of the old pureblood ways and rituals, then it might have. But this was proof positive, a statement of existence and not refusal of existence. Zacharias did not think anything was going to make it go away. Murder the wizards who believed in it and burn their books, and still someone would do the research. It would rise again. The facts existed whether anyone cared to believe in them.

"Of what kind?"

"I read the books."

"And what did they show you?"

Zacharias spread his hands. "That our most basic and most primal attitudes are right, had we listened to their wording," he said calmly. "That it is magic that matters, not blood and not birth and not wealth. Once, we used that to justify poor pureblood families climbing to the

ranks of the great, as long as a sufficiently powerful head guided them. And it was used to excuse the actions of the son or daughter of a poor parent.” Miriam’s eyes narrowed. Zacharias wondered what tones and inflections she had heard in those particular words. He hoped they were the ones he had meant to put there. “They had their magic, and their magic should shine unclouded, not dimmed by the stupid or thoughtless decision of a weaker mother. Or father.”

“And, Zacharias?”

“Hermione is very strong,” said Zacharias thoughtfully. “So is Hannah Abbott, a Muggleborn student in my House. And some others, like Justin, whom you’ve met, aren’t that strong, but they can recognize power, and follow it because they know that magic so pure has a claim on them that no other allegiance can. They fought for Harry in the Midsummer battle, Mother, just as we did. The difference lies in that they didn’t need rituals to convince them, or alliances. They have native honor, native recognition of magic. They have to, since magic is the only bond that brings many of them into the wizarding world at all; otherwise, they would live out their lives in ignorance of its existence. I have to admire their courage, Mother, riding a ship into uncharted waters. I don’t know that I could do it, be taken from everything I’ve known and loved at the age of eleven and shown that I have one thing—just one thing—in common with many other people, but that a good portion of those other people would despise me for something else I had no control over, my birth.”

“There are many other things that matter in our world now,” said his mother. “You know this, Zacharias. Or we would simply have followed Dumbledore mindlessly, and Harry as mindlessly now.”

“But that’s not what we say,” Zacharias insisted mildly. “We say that we’re not prejudiced against Muggleborns, and that they’re welcome among us, and that we would even marry them if they’re strong enough.” He took a deep breath. “But you don’t want me to marry Hermione, Mother, even though she’s strong enough.”

“That is a consequence of her political attitudes, Zacharias, and not only her blood.”

“But her blood is part of it.”

His mother was silent.

Zacharias shook his head. "I think I need a wife like that, Mother. I would be bored in five years if I didn't have one. I might get along better with someone like Susan Bones, who's been raised to the duties of a pureblood wife and knows the pace of our rituals, but my life would be little more than dancing, of one kind or another. I am smarter than most of the people in the school, you know that. I want a challenge."

“And when your challenge deserts you to run off with another man, or wakes you in the middle of the night with her arguing?”

“I’ll be sure to keep Hermione away from intelligent Muggleborn men who support house elf rights,” said Zacharias, dryly. “And I would rather wake because of arguing than because of my political enemies attacking my home. With Hermione at my side, I’ll see my enemies coming before they get that close.”

His mother sighed. "Take a few days to think about this, Zacharias. I believe you will change your mind." And the flames flickered and vanished as she ended the firecall.

Zacharias shook his head and stood. Yes, perhaps if he had been childishly infatuated with Hermione, he would change his mind. But he had other, more practical reasons to marry her. Keeping himself from boredom for the next hundred and thirty years was a large part of that.

And what could he say? She had been right. He would be stupid to ignore that, and he was not stupid.

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Indigena Apparated into being near her house, and then paused. There were lights in Thornhall where there should be none. Only her house elves were in the house, awaiting her return, and they did not

need light, their large eyes seeing more clearly at night than ever humans' did.

She sped her steps as she moved forward. The thorns on her back slid out of their sheaths and twined restlessly in the air, looking for someone to stab. Indigena rubbed their bark, letting the bumps beneath her fingers soothe her rage, and then reached out and opened the door.

A lamp burned in the hall. Indigena saw no house elf near it. She paused, looking around, listening, the thorny rose on her wrist whose poison would kill in two minutes lifting its head. Its petals rustled as it sniffed for danger. Indigena could smell nothing, though, save a faint, warm scent that was like her own, if she had visited sometime in the last few days and moved through several rooms.

That made her narrow down her suspicions as to whom it could be, at least. There were only a few people who both smelled like her and were sufficiently powerful to get through the wards. But Indigena could not imagine why they would want to. She had gone to Voldemort, had fulfilled the honor debt that Yaxley had owed him because her nephew Feldspar had refused to return and join him. How dare they blame her now, if they were here to blame her?

With stiff steps, she walked into her study and stood there, regarding the woman in front of the bookshelves silently. She did not look up, but Indigena had no doubt she was aware of her presence. Indigena was not the only one in the family to have made sacrifices in return for gifts, nor even the only one whose sacrifices had made her less than human.

"Lazuli," she said at last.

Her sister set the book she held carefully back down, then turned to face Indigena. She looked as lovely as always, pale, slender. The striped shadows on her face could have come from the lit lamps. Indigena eyed her hands, but Lazuli wore her trademark heavy robes. One would have to go up and feel her arms before one could find the damage done to them.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

Lazuli nodded once, as if she had expected the question. Her eyes were as bright a blue as the gem she was named after, her dark hair heavy and long as the robes were. She and Indigena did not look like sisters at all, but that was only fair; they had had different fathers. “I came to see if you had abandoned the house,” she said, voice as soft and fine as drifting dust. “If you had, by rights, Thornhall belongs to me.”

Indigena shook her head once, in weariness. “Lazuli, you know where I am. You know what I am. None of that gives you a right to assume me dead, and none of that is sufficient excuse to be in a house where most of the plants would murder you on scent.” She moved a step forward. “You have been here for days. And you could always have owed me to ask such a simple question. I asked once before.” Her thorns began stirring on her back again. “What are you doing here?”

Lazuli studied her in thoughtful silence. Indigena had never been able to intimidate her when she was fully human, nor even after she began weaving plants beneath her skin, but she had hoped this more drastic change after Parkinson’s blood curses would help. It did not seem it did. Lazuli might have been regarding a cat puffed up and hissing at her for all the reaction she showed.

“You surely must know.” Her voice had at least a hint of surprise, when minutes had passed with Indigena refusing to answer this time. “Well. Not know. But you know what I did, what gift I chose. Does it surprise you to learn that I am interested to hear a vates is moving about in the world?”

And Indigena had to turn a corner and face something she had never suspected she would. Most of the Yaxley family, though they practiced Dark magic and were unafraid to walk the shadows, did not join in the wars of Light and Dark. Feldspar had been the single, stupid exception, and he was Peridot’s son, not Lazuli’s, so his stupidity was understandable. Indigena had been the answer to that forgetfulness. She had never thought she would have to face one of her family across a battlefield. Voldemort could offer them nothing, and nor could Harry.

"A vates has been moving in the world for the last year, Lazuli," she said. "Why choose his side now?"

"Did I say I was choosing his side?" Still soft and fine voice, still no trace of a smile. That was what Indigena found hardest to comprehend about her sister, the lack of any human warmth, the refusal to turn a hair. Lucius Malfoy was more human, given that he gloated over his enemies. Indigena would have said she herself was more human, but with the shrubbery growing under her skin, she couldn't claim that any more. "I am merely interested. And the reason I could feel him, Lazuli, was that he stepped into the paths between Light and Dark. He may, someday, grow interested in what lurks there. He may, someday, wish to help Jacinth."

Indigena snorted in spite of herself. "You chose what she was to be yourself, Lazuli." It still stunned her, sometimes, what Lazuli had given up in pursuit of improvement not for herself, but for her child. A Seer had told her, accurately enough, that Lazuli would never bear the daughter she wanted by lying with any man; her fate was to have sons, or stay barren. So Lazuli had found and lain with something nonhuman, a nameless beast that skittered between Light and Dark. Jacinth was born half-human only, and Lazuli would be executed if she so much as mentioned the name of the father's species to anyone else. They were—not native to the paths between Dark and Light, but something wizards had bound there, and feared, and forgotten long ago. But if they found that a witch had summoned one and given it partial access to the wizarding world, even if it was only through the gateway of her body and a child of impure blood, they could remember.

Indigena eyed Lazuli's arms again. "What are you missing today?" she asked.

She blinked in shock when her sister answered the challenge by undoing the sleeves of her robes and pushing them up. Her arms were very slender, not much more than bone. Huge chunks of flesh were taken from them, bloodless, worried by invisible teeth. As Indigena watched, another vanished. They would regrow tomorrow,

and be taken again, and again, and every day for the rest of Lazuli's life. She had accepted that as the price for Jacinth's fathering.

Indigena did not want to face her sister on the battlefield. More than that, though, she did not want Lazuli's indomitable will behind Harry.

"He wouldn't be able to do anything for you," she warned. "Not when the beasts out of the paths can't survive except by devouring other things."

"He freed the Dementors," said Lazuli. "He freed the werewolves. He is freeing the house elves, whom many purebloods would claim we cannot survive without." Her voice was water with the moon reflected in it. "I have already freed my elves."

Indigena stared at her.

"They were frightening Jacinth."

"Please, sister." Indigena made some effort to swallow, to speak calmly. "You know that the Dark Lord will win. He is too clever, and Harry is too weak. My Lord knows magic he has not yet used on the battlefield. He is immortal." She knew what the means of that immortality was, and she briefly wished she could tell Lazuli, so she would understand how hopeless Harry's cause was, but her Lord had bound her by oath to say no word about it except to another Death Eater. "He has his methods of building up another cadre of faithful followers. You will doom yourself, and Jacinth, if you join Harry. He will lose, and the Dark Lord will destroy you and the daughter you love."

Lazuli shook her head. Indigena wondered why, until she said, "He will face Jacinth's father if he tries that. I have much to gain from the vates, Indigena, and nothing to lose. You are lost to Yaxley in any case. And if someday my daughter can walk in the sunlight, her heritage acknowledged by all, her father sometimes free to attend at her side—I would pay much."

"We are going to defeat him," said Indigena softly.

“You consider yourself a Death Eater, sister?”

“I am bound,” said Indigena, a little more sharply than she meant to. “I had no choice in that, just as you would have had none had the Dark Lord chosen you. And I’ve always known what my road cost. They call me Thorn Bitch. I know it. Even now I am doing things I would not do if I were free, spinning webs that will upend the world. But, still, sister. Vita desinit, decus permanet. I know the motto of our family as well as you do.”

Lazuli nodded. “And if I choose Harry’s side, I will hold by him as firmly as you hold by your Lord.”

Indigena felt a deep sorrow engulf her as she gazed at her sister. There was nothing she could do, no way that she could end this. She could not have forced Lazuli to do anything even if she were free. Of course, if she were free, Lazuli’s determination to join Harry would just be the amusing matter of a joke, not the difference between life and death, as it would be now.

She knew it was irrational, to fear her own sister this much. But ever since Lazuli had chosen as she had, to be devoured each day for as long as she lived and consider it small price for her snake-eyed daughter, Indigena did not think anything could truly oppose her. Let her join Harry, and the Dark Lord’s victory had just become that much less sure, Horcruxes and all.

And there were others—wizards and witches, Dark and Light alike, who had mated with creatures other than Veela, the only magical species widely recognized as having the legal right to cross with humans. There were children with glamours on their ears, on their eyes, on their hands to give them the right number of fingers or hide extra ones. If Harry could command Lazuli’s allegiance, he might be able to command theirs. It was a force Indigena had not even anticipated him calling on.

“If you were only concerned about honor,” Lazuli said, bringing her out of her daze, “you would not care, sister. You would fulfill your oath and leave me to fulfill mine. I do not think you are entirely his, even now.”

Indigena lifted her head. "Thornhall is still not yours," she said. "The question you came to have answered is answered. Leave, Lazuli."

Lazuli nodded and turned away, another chunk of meat vanishing from her right arm. Indigena watched her go, then turned feverishly to the shelves and drew forth the books she had come looking for, on the old, old forces of self-sacrifice, of love and hatred and how they could be used to hold and hurt. Her Lord wished to know if love, after all, was the force that would oppose him, and for that Indigena needed more than Odi et Amo, useful as it had proved in other things.

At least one good thing had come of her sister's implacable behavior, she consoled herself as she turned away. She now knew a threat that might help Harry and oppose her Lord, and could warn him about it before it manifested. Perhaps it might give him time to ensnare those who had mated with Dark creatures as allies. He had once won werewolves by offering them freedom. He could do the same thing this time.

She had almost left the study before it occurred to her to go back and look at the book her sister had laid down when she came in. The title did not reassure her at all.

The Paths of the Lords. It had a section on the vates, and on what it meant to be vates. Knowing Lazuli, she had used the book to look for answers on whether Harry would be likely to help Jacinth, and found them there.

Indigena swallowed. She had to trust in her Lord, in her own honor, and the plans she had made. Harry was likely to fall before the calendar year was out, or perhaps the school year; her Lord had not been specific in his gloating. Then she might never need to face her sister, and Lazuli and Jacinth could remain in the shadows, letting them shelter them, instead of chancing exposure to a disgusted wizarding world and a harsh war.

Chapter Sixty-Nine: A Birthday Celebration

Harry cast his fifteenth charm on the letter. It glowed a little, and then the glow faded, utterly failing to show that it had been smeared with any venom that would transfer to his skin on contact.

“Someone could want to ally with you for your own sake, you know,” Draco muttered, edging away. Harry’s fourteenth charm had turned his pancakes green. “You don’t have to use every spell ever invented on that letter.”

“You would have snapped at me if I didn’t and then you saw the signature,” Harry pointed out. The letter had come with an unfamiliar owl, who still sat at the edge of the table, preening herself and waiting for a response. Harry had cast several spells before he unfolded the parchment. Then he’d caught sight of the signature, which ended in Yaxley, and decided that the letter could stand a few more.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Harry shook his head—Draco would never acknowledge when he was being unfair—and finally opened the letter. Reading it left him no less mystified than before.

Harry vates:

My name is Lazuli Yaxley. I am the half-sister of Indigena, whom, as you know, fights with Voldemort. We had the same mother, but different fathers. My other sister is Peridot, the mother of Feldspar, whose stupidity in serving the Dark Lord during the First War condemned my sister to serve him in this one.

I have discovered recently that you may be amenable to helping me with a large problem of prejudice and disgust in the wizarding world. My daughter Jacinth, for various and sundry reasons, will never have a free life if some common attitudes do not alter. You are working to alter these attitudes in regards to werewolves and house elves. It occurs me that you could do the same for her. I would like you to meet her, and me, on neutral ground. I am not willing to come to Hogwarts, but the house of one of your allies would be welcome.

We have much to discuss. I can offer you much: intimate knowledge of Indigena, which will be important now that she is the Dark Lord's most dangerous Death Eater; knowledge of the paths between Light and Dark without your having to venture into them; a possible source of allies in other parents who have children like mine; my wand and my will; the support of a small portion of the House of Yaxley, though in this we are individuals and it will not be a formal family alliance. In return, I ask much: for you to fight for Jacinth as you would for any of the other magical creatures under your protection; for you to support those Yaxleys who agree to support you should the Dark Lord fall on us; for you to not report me to the Ministry when you learn the extent of the laws I have broken; for a fair hearing when my sister has been a source of torment to you; for the meeting on neutral ground. My owl will await your reply.

Lazuli Yaxley.

Harry shook his head with a small, quick frown. In a way, he didn't want to refuse. This was the kind of vates work he was supposed to do, wasn't it? He didn't know what connection Lazuli and Jacinth might have with magical creatures; if Jacinth were half-Veela, then they could have gone through the Veela Council to ally with him. And if Jacinth were not half-Veela...

That would explain the line about not reporting her to the Ministry.

"Interesting?" Draco asked, at his right shoulder.

Harry handed him the letter. He expected laughter, and a shake of his head, and a murmur that a Yaxley must be out of her mind to think that Harry would meet with her. Instead, Draco's brow furrowed, and he chewed one corner of his mouth so much that Harry thought he'd forgotten and mistaken it for a pancake.

"Well?" Harry asked at last. "What do you think?"

"You could do worse than to meet with her." Draco handed the letter back and leaned his head the other way, closing his eyes, still making his lip a ragged mess with constant bites. "I'm trying to remember

everything my mother told me about the House of Yaxley,” he said.
“Hush a moment.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Only a moment?”

“Hush, I said.”

Harry turned back to his orange juice. Argutus, who was draped around his shoulders, asked for an explanation of the letter, and Harry gave it to him as best he could. To his surprise, Argutus stretched his neck forward and flicked his tongue around the edge of the parchment, then retracted his head and scented around the edge of Harry’s flesh hand, too.

“I thought so,” he said, sounding satisfied.

“What did you think?”

“There was the scent of a strange snake, and I could not see one.” Argutus wound himself partially on to the table to steal a sausage from Millicent’s plate. She rolled her eyes, but permitted it. Most of the Slytherins seemed to think that if they weren’t swift enough to prevent Argutus from taking their food away, they didn’t deserve to keep it. “But the scent is on the letter. At one point it was in a room with a snake.”

Harry inclined his head, almost unwillingly. If Lazuli Yaxley kept a snake, that would make sense. It intrigued him, and he had almost nothing to fear on that quarter.

“Can you tell what kind?”

“Unfamiliar. I look forward to meeting it. It smells like wind.”

Harry looked thoughtfully at the letter again. He knew one place that might be a good candidate for his meeting with Lazuli; the difficulty was in getting his potential host to agree to it.

“Draco.”

Draco jolted and opened his eyes, glaring at him. "I told you to keep quiet and let me remember everything I've heard about the Yaxley family."

"Oh, I know enough about that," said Harry blandly, and delighted in the way that Draco's glare grew sharper. Really, he ought to think more carefully if he's going to handle politics for me. "Generally undeclared, but tending towards the Darker side of magic. And obsessed with honor. If Lazuli does consent to ally with me the way Indigena serves Voldemort, then perhaps I need not fear her."

"My mother fears her, though," Draco insisted. "Not anyone else in the family, not even Indigena or their sister Peridot, just her."

Harry blinked. That's unexpected. "And did she say why? Or is that bit of important information still hiding in the depths of your memory?"

Draco hit him, but his eyes were serious. "She said that Lazuli Yaxley has an implacable will. Once she decides she wants something, she won't stop working until she gets it. And that could be dangerous, Harry, as you know. She might decide that she wants something other than your friendship. It would be better if you didn't get involved with this at all."

"But she's reached out to me, and rejecting her now could be dangerous," Harry reminded him. "I don't know if she has any pride to insult, but if she does, then this would do it. I'm vates, Draco. I can't refuse to help someone sight unseen, and just because I might be afraid of her. It'll make me look weak."

"And that's what she's counting on," said Draco evenly. "Why do you think she appealed to you in the name of the good you do for magical creatures?"

"Because she wanted my help," said Harry, getting a bit exasperated now. Sometimes, Draco was both eager to remind him of the danger of politics and seemingly convinced that Harry had to abandon his standards in order to deal with that danger. "She knew this was a good means of securing it. I wouldn't have expected her to do anything else."

Dear Harry:

Meeting with a Yaxley? You have gone quite mad. A meeting with someone else of another Dark family I could understand or accept. I would even be willing to open my home to a Light wizard, if one ever agreed to step through Blackstone's doors. But this?

I had been wondering why you sent a letter to me rather than spoke with me by means of the phoenix song spell. Now I understand. You wish to appeal more formally than the spell allows. The answer to part of your request is no, Harry. My wife and I would both welcome a birthday celebration for Marian, and having you at it. We agree that she needs to live in a different world, and you have not spent as much time with her as we once envisioned you doing. But our home will not permit the foot of a Yaxley to cross its threshold when her sister fights with the man who once ruled my life, and nearly ruined it.

Adalrico Bulstrode.

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Dear Mr. Bulstrode:

I understand your reluctance, and your reasons are well-expressed. As it happens, Lazuli Yaxley has agreed to an alternate location for the meeting, one I am surprised she accepted. I will come to Marian's birthday celebration, and not meet with Yaxley and her daughter until afterwards.

I hope you and your family are well.

Harry.

SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS

"Harry."

Elfrida came to meet him, clad in her pale blonde hair as in dignity. Harry caught her hands and kissed them carefully, secretly delighting

in the fact that he had a left hand now to match her left one, and that she neither flinched nor complained about it being too cold. She cupped his chin as soon as the formal greeting was done, and lifted his face so that she could look critically at him.

"You are tired," she said.

"I shouldn't have agreed to lead a political alliance if I wanted my beauty sleep," Harry told her, with a slight grin, and stepped away from Blackstone's fireplace so that Snape, Draco, Peter, and Regulus could follow him. Hawthorn was already standing in a corner of the room, he saw, talking quietly with Adalrico. He nodded to her. Neither Millicent nor Marian had appeared yet. A fireplace across the room brightened, and Narcissa stepped out, shaking her skirts to rid them of soot. Harry raised an eyebrow. It was one of the few times he had seen Draco's mother without formal robes. These skirts swirled in deep shades of green that emphasized her pallor and the crown of equally pale hair around her head.

"No one else is expected," said Elfrida, catching his eye.

Harry found himself relaxing. Sometimes, as much as he treasured his newer allies, he wanted to be with his oldest ones. Not even in front of Owen and Syrinx could he let down as many of his masks as he could here, though Owen and Syrinx would be accompanying him to his meeting with Lazuli Yaxley after Marian's festival. He smiled and moved over to Adalrico.

"Where's the birthday girl?" he asked.

"Still asleep, but Millicent is fetching her." Adalrico held out his hand. Harry hesitated a moment, seeing it was the one wounded in the Department of Mysteries, but clasped it when Adalrico wriggled the fingers. The deep, fleshy bruises on them were gradually beginning to fade. "I am glad that you agreed to come, Harry," he added, as they let each other's hands go. "It will be good for my children to know a Lord-level wizard who does not want to conquer the wizarding world or control them. It is a chance I never had."

Harry murmured something polite in return, while fixing his eyes on Adalrico's face. He could see shadows burning there, but Adalrico's eyes remained steady. It seemed he didn't resent Harry for asking to use Blackstone as neutral ground. Perhaps it was for the best. Harry had been stunned when Lazuli agreed to meet him at Cobley-by-the-Sea, but being surrounded by wards he was linked to, as Black heir, would give him a security even Blackstone could not have provided.

"It is no more than Lord-level wizards should have been doing all along," said Harry, meaning it. The more he tried to learn about Dumbledore through questioning Snape and Peter on their school memories, the more intensely puzzled he became. Why would Dumbledore have wanted to control his students the way he had tried to control Lily through the ethic of sacrifice? Why would he want to have mindless followers fighting behind him, instead of freely chosen allies fighting beside him? It made no sense to Harry. Voldemort's madness was actually easier to interpret; he had known nothing else, had probably been born that way. But Dumbledore had known, at one time in his life, justice and a powerful relationship to the rest of the world not based on exploitation. That anyone would choose to fall from that was—

Wasn't comprehensible. And Harry was just going to have to get used to that, and accept that his training and his magic had led him in different directions, he supposed.

"Here she is!" Adalrico exclaimed, turning away from him.

Harry caught a glimpse of Hawthorn's face as he followed suit. She was very still, but there was a wistful happiness in the backs of her hazel eyes. If she could not feel joy with her own daughter dead, at least she might feel its echo in the presence of other people's children, Harry thought.

He reached out, making sure he used his right hand, and clasped her arm. Hawthorn gave him a strained smile.

Then Harry faced the door of the receiving room, where Millicent was walking beside Marian, murmuring advice to her much smaller sister that Harry doubted she was taking. Marian had a child's garment on,

a cross between a tiny robe and a long shirt, and her dark hair was done up in ribbons of green and white. Harry raised his eyebrows. The Bulstrodes truly are fond of the old ways. In some of the most ancient rituals, those ribbons would have been used to signal that the child was now leaving the winter of infancy—the winter when they could easily have died, and when the family could have more easily given them up—and entering a spring in which her siblings and parents would surrender their hearts to her. Of course, it could also easily signify Marian's birthday on the cusp of spring.

Marian's head turned as she came into the room, and she scanned their faces carefully. Her eyes fixed on Harry, and stayed there. Harry held his breath. She could probably sense his magic as the strongest in the room. Her reaction would be telling, and might make all the difference as to whether Adalrico's idea of rearing her around a friendly Lord-level wizard would actually work.

Marian broke into a smile. Then she pulled away from Millicent's hand and wobbled unsteadily across the room to him. Harry knelt to receive her, putting himself as much on her level as possible.

There was a stain on Marian's shirt, as if she'd been eating a purple berry. It didn't seem to matter. "Harry," she said, and then clasped his robe and tugged on it insistently. If she noticed the silver hand as different from the flesh hand, it obviously didn't interest her. "More magic."

Harry nodded slightly, hoped that Snape had his shields raised against a headache—he'd complained enough about this day, Merlin knew, and Harry didn't really want to distress him further—and lowered his shields.

Warm dark blue spread out from his palms, as if he'd opened the gate to an ocean there. Harry smelled the scent of sun-warmed grass, and autumn wildflowers. Two purple hands unfolded from the light and began to paint a picture, which grew to resemble Marian's face.

Marian laughed. The sound was free, uncontrolled, not afraid at all. She put out one hand of her own, and seemed utterly enchanted

when Harry solidified one of the purple fingers enough so that she could touch it.

Harry felt his eyes sting with tears. He reached out and carefully picked Marian up. She didn't kick, though Elfrida had warned him she might, but went on gazing into the heart of the light, utterly absorbed, poking a finger now and then and giggling when it poked her back.

Harry ducked his head and rubbed his face in silky, dark, warm hair. For a moment, notions of politics tumbled away from him, and so did notions of how wonderful it might be if every child could be unafraid of magic. There was only the fact that he knew he was acting right in response to the rest of the world.

Jing-Xi had told him about that, the responsibility that other Lords and Ladies—mostly of the Light—felt for their people, and how wonderful it was when they knew they had come down from lofty heights they placed themselves on and others cooperated in building, and actually interacted with others.

Harry hadn't known if he would ever feel it, since he seemed mostly to piss other people off through things like insisting on house elf freedom. He hadn't known if he would ever fulfill the promise of the words Narcissa had written as Starborn, encouraging him not to be a Lord, to defend and serve and protect instead of compel.

Now he knew he could, if only for a moment at a time.

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Hawthorn glanced down at her hands. Tears were blinding her, and not because Harry holding Marian like that brought back memories of Pansy at a much younger age, yelling as she raced in circles through the house and made the elves squeal.

For a moment, the life she'd lived lately, the one in which vengeance against Indigena ached and pushed against her, opened up, and sunlight came through the crack in the clouds.

It was more beautiful and more piercing than the moment in which she'd given up bloody vengeance for Claudia. It said that perhaps life was more important than death, and the dead must give place to the living. It said that it was things like this which mattered, more than the time when a heart stopped beating.

I cannot think like this. I cannot. Hawthorn ran a hand over her face in anxiety. Pansy was my daughter. I must take vengeance for her.

She turned away from Harry and Marian, because they were only confusing her, and watched Draco Malfoy watching Harry instead. The expression on his face was easy enough to understand.

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Draco felt as though he understood, then. He'd been going through Harry's memories in the Pensieve he gave him for Christmas. Some made him laugh. Some enraged him. Some broke his heart. None of them had ever let him understand Harry's lack of ambition, why he wouldn't use his magic to win just some small luxuries for himself, delights no one else would miss and which they'd be glad to give to someone of Lord-level power.

Now he knew. Harry didn't want them because he was more interested in the greater delights. His magic lapped the room like a purring serpent. He was happier in that moment than Draco had ever seen him outside of bed, his will and reality in accord, and it was his magic that had helped him bring it about. He didn't want people to face him with fear, but with wonder instead.

Draco put a hand on his chest, feeling as if he'd swallowed a chicken bone. Harry didn't like fear.

Oh. Oh.

And that would be the reason he'd included the desire to not cause fear in the oaths for the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, and why he didn't want to intimidate people, and why he didn't want to keep house elves as slaves or servants. Why should he? He could have better things.

Draco understood all about wanting better things. He had simply never imagined that respect and wonder could be two of those better things.

He wanted to move forward and put his hands on Harry's shoulders and kiss him breathless, but they were in public and Harry hadn't put Marian down yet. It would have to wait.

For once, Draco didn't mind waiting.

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“Vates.”

Harry inclined his head slowly as he stepped around the door into the blank stone room of Cobley-by-the-Sea where Lazuli Yaxley had agreed to meet him. "Madam Yaxley." Snape followed close on his heels, Draco just behind, with Peter and Regulus peering over their shoulders. Owen and Syrinx stepped through the door and spread out to stand on either side of it, staring at Lazuli all the while.

Lazuli, who had been looking out the window, turned to face them. And Harry met her eyes and understood why Narcissa might fear her.

She was not the strongest wizard in the room; she was considerably weaker than Snape, and perhaps Regulus, and of course Harry himself. Her magic had a Dark edge, but Harry had met and felt more vicious ones. Her cold, polished manner was one common to many purebloods.

It was what the lack of expression on her face meant that could frighten someone else. She appeared to be totally uncaught, unlinked, unbound. No one else, said her face, had ever made such an impression on her that she would hold herself back and do what they said. She had never feared anyone.

Unconquered.

Harry subdued the flash of immediate approval that caused in his heart. He might like her as vates, but he was not here only as that. Lazuli also proposed to join his political alliance.

“Madam,” he repeated, when she said nothing, but continued to study him. “You agreed to bring your daughter. Is she here?”

“Jacinth,” Lazuli breathed, not taking her eyes off him. Harry had no idea what she felt, what she was thinking. It didn’t show in any flicker of expression or any tiny gesture she made, both the places he was used to looking for them.

A small girl came around the side of the one piece of furniture in the room, a large chair that faced the window. Harry studied her. She looked about seven years old, and normal for a witch that age: dark-haired, pale, nervous. She ducked her head away from Harry’s gaze before he could see the color of her eyes or make out much of her face. Of course, if what Harry suspected was true and Jacinth was half-human and half violently otherwise, she was probably wearing a glamour in any case.

“This is my daughter Jacinth,” Lazuli said, and put one hand on the girl’s shoulder. “For her, I offer you alliance and loyalty, in all the terms discussed in the letter. For her, in return, you would be fighting. I wish you to change the world so that she does not have to hide in the shadows any more.”

Harry cleared his throat with an effort. “I would like to see her fully, first. Am I right in assuming that Jacinth’s father was not human, Madam Yaxley?”

“That is so,” said Lazuli. “Finite Incantatem.”

Jacinth’s outline rippled under her hands. She looked up again, half-cringing. Harry caught his breath, and strove to make sure that nothing showed on his face.

Jacinth’s eyes were huge, golden, and caught under eye-ridges that made them stand out from her head like a snake’s. Delicate, incongruous lashes fringed them, nevertheless, and Harry could see

from her nervous blink that she did have eyelids. A forked tongue flickered past her lips.

Lazuli stepped back, and Jacinth moved forward, arms spread out as if putting on a display. Delicate gray wings, the color of shadows, unfolded from her back; they resembled a dragon's, though they weren't quite the span of her arms, and Harry didn't think she could use them to fly. Her robes split at the back to reveal a gray-black tail that ended in a triangular point, and when she spun, Harry could see that her hair joined with her spine, melting into obsidian-like spikes along her spine that easily sliced holes in the cloth. She had two legs, but they nearly seemed like afterthoughts next to the smooth muscled slide of her back.

Harry heard Snape draw his wand. Before he could say anything, or Snape could intone a curse, Lazuli said, "Jacinth's father is here."

Harry looked up to see the shadows boiling in one corner of the room. Something formed there—a shape, dark and coiled, with no sign of legs, and no sign of a head, either. From its back splayed wings, from its chest projected a tongue. A maw opened and closed at one end, displaying teeth as sharp as Jacinth's spikes.

"Severus," Harry said softly, never taking his eyes away from the shadows. He could feel its—his—magic now, and it was mad, sliding, Dark but too wild for the Dark, shot with gleams of Light. It is no wonder that Lazuli said she could give me knowledge of the paths between Dark and Light. She went there to mate with this—thing. "Do not."

"Do you know what that is?" Snape demanded, his voice choked with nearly as much fear as he had ever shown around the werewolves, if not the same rage and hatred. "They hunted us, Harry. To give them passage back to the world is madness. And they will have it, if there is a child even half of their blood alive." He spun on Lazuli. "Why did you do this? Why?"

"I wanted to," said Lazuli Yaxley.

Harry looked back to her. She had one arm slightly tilted, in such a way that he knew her wand was up her sleeve, and she had her lips parted in way that suggested her next words would be Avada Kedavra. She would not miss, either.

Harry could see emotion in her eyes for the first time. Love, such fierce love, and such implacable will. Harry had no doubt that she saw Jacinth exactly as she was, all the time, and loved her the more for it.

"You cannot negotiate a settlement with them," Snape said, jerking his head at the shadows. The creature had lost most of his form, Harry saw, coming forward to coil around Lazuli's feet and lifting his head to her arms. For a moment, her sleeve sagged, as if a chunk of her flesh had vanished. Harry thought of the creature's teeth, and wondered what price a nameless beast out of the paths would demand for fathering a child. "It is not done. It is impossible."

"The vates does the impossible on a regular basis." Lazuli lowered her arm. "And this is his decision."

Harry turned to face Jacinth. She had stopped spinning and stood with her eyes lowered, her hands locked together. Delicate gray webs fluttered around her fingers, he saw, opening and then closing again like breathing flowers.

"How do you feel?" he asked her, striving to make his voice gentle. "Do you wish to live in the world your mother wants me to build?"

Her eyes came up and met his, astonished. Then her face broke out in the most amazing smile, stretching the shadows of scales beneath her skin. "You can talk to me," she said.

Harry realized, then, that he was speaking Parseltongue; the sight of Jacinth's eyes had probably been enough to make him drop into the language. He opened his mouth to apologize, but Jacinth rushed on eagerly.

"I can speak English, too, but not so well. It makes me sound like a freak. And none of the others can understand me in this language

except Father, and he only talks when he feels like it.” She moved a step forward, and the intense loneliness in her eyes made Harry’s heart hurt. “You can talk,” she repeated, as if it were a miracle. “Will you come back and talk to me sometimes?”

“Of course,” said Harry quietly. “If you wish it.” He didn’t glance at Lazuli right now. This was between him and Jacinth. “And that will happen whether we become allies or not. But do you want your mother and I to become allies? It would mean other people knowing about you.” In Parseltongue, that came out more like “reading all your scent.”

Jacinth swallowed. “I—could you make them stop staring sometimes?”

“That’s what I would try to do,” said Harry. “Make them stop staring. Make them not care what you sound like when you speak English. But I might not win. It might mean people would know you, but hate you and fear you. And it would take years even if I did win. Do you want this?”

Her tongue flickered out again. Harry wondered if she was tasting his scent, reading his truthfulness there. Then her eyes came back to his face with such force he almost gasped.

“Yes,” she said. “Because I want to be able to walk down the street someday and not have people try to kill me, which Mother said would happen. Some stares wouldn’t be so bad, compared to that. And I could always insult them back in this language. And Father says when I grow my teeth, I can threaten them, and they’ll run.” She hesitated. “And that’s the world where you live, isn’t it?”

Harry nodded.

“Then I want to visit you there. Sometimes,” Jacinth added hastily, as if aware she might be asking for too much.

“You have it,” said Harry, and turned to face Lazuli. The shadow that had coiled around her was gone. She was watching him with an expression he had never seen before.

“Your daughter wants this,” he told her. “And if I could set Dementors free, I may be able to do the same thing for Jacinth’s father. I’ll fight.”

Lazuli sank so gracefully that Harry didn’t realize what she was doing until she was already on one knee. Then she shook back her sleeves, and Harry realized she was showing him her arms.

Her half-devoured arms.

“I paid this price for Jacinth’s fathering,” Lazuli said, into the silence. “Every day I will pay it. And I would pay it in death. I love her, and she is mine. Do you fight for her, there is nothing I will not do to support you. I know the meaning of sacrifice.”

Harry could only nod, and then Snape was grabbing his shoulder and spinning him around and trying to tell him something about Jacinth’s father.

Harry listened calmly. There were going to be arguments. He could not deny that. He would have to struggle hard for a compromise, if Jacinth’s father was an enemy of wizardkind the way that Snape said he was.

He looked back at Jacinth, who was now occupied in petting the coils of a shadowy body that wound around her.

So I’ll fight. It’s not the first time.

Chapter Seventy: We Change

Indigena shifted the book in the dim light falling through the mouth of the burrow, and then sighed. It was no good. Lately, her Lord's snake had been restless around light, so she would have to go above ground to read either by the radiance of the waning sun or a cast Lumos.

Standing, she glanced back once at the Dark Lord. He did not move, his hands clasped on his chest and locked around the golden cup, the flesh-snake curled asleep in the crook of his elbow. Indigena knew better than to think he was in a coma, now, as she had when she first found him. Now, she knew that he was hunting, sweeping on deadly, silent wings through the currents of thought, all the more deadly because his prey, like the owl's, did not know he was there.

She shuddered and climbed the shallow series of steps that led out of the burrow, pausing to blink in the sunlight.

The hole was high up on the slight rise that cradled the Riddle House. Indigena could see Muggle houses if she looked in the right direction, but she had never wanted to. She preferred to look down on the graveyard instead, where the ruins of her thorns that had poisoned Rosier still lay, and on an old, abandoned garden. Indigena had started to coax the garden back to life.

That might be a pleasant place to read.

She had barely moved a step forward, though, when the air in front of her shimmered, and a sea eagle dropped through and flopped gracelessly to the ground. Indigena rolled her eyes and stared over his head at the garden. Perhaps if she concentrated hard enough, he would go away.

He didn't have the grace to. He changed back into Falco instead, and climbed to his feet, coughing slowly. Indigena studied him. She could see that the sides of his face had changed, the skin peeling off and sloughing away. That pleased her. He was devoting more and more time to the study of the Dark that had once consumed her Lord, had made him less than human even before he constructed the

Horcruxes. That could only mean Falco was further along the path to Declaring. The sooner that happened, the sooner everything would be over. Indigena didn't really like Falco Parkinson, nor some of the things his presence obliged her to do.

Like be polite to him, for example.

"My Lord," she said, keeping her voice empty of the warmth she used for Voldemort. "May I help you?"

Falco glanced at her once, then turned to the burrow. "Why have you not yet removed to the dwelling I prepared for you?"

Indigena choked on bile. "Why should we?" she asked at last. "You could have filled it with traps, for all I know. Did you think that my lord trusted you?"

"This one is insufficient." Falco's glare might have taken in the Muggle town and the garden—Indigena felt her thorns lash at the thought—as well as the hole in the earth that Indigena had emerged from. "He deserves a habitation more fitting of his glory, and his destiny. I have made one for him."

"He will move when he is ready," said Indigena. "You forget, Lord Parkinson. Lord Voldemort is no boy to be bullied and pushed and shoved about like Harry." And if you saw half as much as you think you do, you blind fool, then you would realize Harry is not, either. "If he wishes to stay here and do important work, then he can stay here and do important work."

"I need to speak with Tom," said Falco abruptly, and pushed past her. "Stay here."

Indigena snorted and sat down in the grass, tugging the book out to lay across her lap. It concerned means of taming wild animals, including details of the numerous unsuccessful attempts to tame dragons. Indigena doubted that she would find what she really needed in here, but she was becoming desperate. Her Lord's plan would be ready soon, and his broken experiment was still not everything it could be. Indigena hoped to find a way to bring it under

control. Her Lord was doubtful that it would endanger all their plans, but Indigena had grown warier since Lazuli had joined Harry. She wanted a guarantee that they would win, not merely the likelihood that they might.

She bent over the nearest page, skimming paragraphs she'd already skimmed, and then paused. With those creatures whose wildness and danger is innate, like the dragon, there is one other method that may be tried: the golden bridle.

Intrigued—she hadn't seen this before because of a few pages stuck together—Indigena began to read.

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"Tom? Tom, are you here?"

He felt him coming, by the vibrations in the earth, long before the words struck his human ears. The flesh-snake stirred, and opened its eyes. Lord Voldemort swung its head so that it was pointing at Falco.

The older wizard came down the steps of the tunnel and halted in front of him, staring at him as if he had expected him to be on his feet. But a true Lord could maintain dignity in any position. Lord Voldemort maintained his, now, lying down and patiently clutching the threads of memory in his mind. What he did now did not come naturally to him; it was a variation on a very old bit of magic he'd once performed, and it depended on certain qualities in the victims' minds that made it necessary he encourage and nurture and prune certain kinds of thoughts, not simply implant his suggestions. It was hard to hold himself back, sometimes, and refrain from commanding those who should be his because of what he was. He had to do the best he could.

"You are here," Falco said, and frowned at him. His voice was blunt, too blunt. When he had his throne back, then Lord Voldemort would let no one speak to him this way. "Why are you not in the other house?"

The snake could see Falco's tattered silver beard, and torn robes, and glazed green eyes. More to the point, it could see the changing of his aura off to the sides of his body, where it had begun to decay and crumble in the wake of his new studies. Lord Voldemort had to stifle exultation. The old fool had turned to the paths, after all, and not been willing to pay the full price for them. The Dark had embraced Lord Voldemort when he Declared because he did not hold back. He gave everything of himself but his life to reach the one goal worth reaching: immortality. Falco was trying to hunt the paths while holding back, hesitating, wishing for Light. The Dark would sense that, and it would rip him apart, for that and for trying to use it for balance, and for daring to trick it and try to pretend that he would belong to Light, too, all these years.

"Because I do not wish to be," said Lord Voldemort, when he judged the time had come. He could have been a great artist, he could have, and right now he was seeing the work of artistry on Falco's face and mourning wasted opportunities. For this was part of his wreaking, part of his working, him and Harry, oh yes, and since Harry could not be here to see their joined triumph and would not appreciate it if he could, it was up to him to take pleasure for the both of them. "I prefer this cave and the memories it holds to the memories of the other house."

Falco's face took on an unusual cast of desperation, and he took a step forward. "It began there," he said. "It has to end there." And then he stopped, as if he feared that he had said too much.

He laughed at him, Lord-Voldemort-still-a-Lord-though-lying-in-the-dirt, thick and rich laughter that boomed like the earth shaking. And he cowered away from him, did Falco of the wrong desires and foolish mind, shaking his head as if he could make it stop shaking, clamping his hands over his ears as if that would change things.

"I know it," said Lord Voldemort, when he could stop laughing. The snake swayed back and forth in response to his mirth, making his view of Falco swing and rock. "I did not know everything at first, but five years ago I discovered the last vestiges of the truth. One cannot wander bodiless in the Dark and learn nothing. A strange thing, an unusual thing, to have a magical heir bound to one at a distance, sharing magic with one, instead of dying properly and returning the

magic to one, but it has happened. I know him. I know the third. I know everything that you would have told me, Falco, and nothing you can say will make me remove there until I am ready. Yes, it will end there. When the snake coils, when death comes down, when the moment swings between three of us balanced and poised, it will be there. Even if it would have ended elsewhere, I shall make a point of seeing the despair in Harry's eyes before I destroy him." He laughed, and this time the thickness was even deeper and even richer, like flesh ridden with maggots before they ripened into flies. "Or will he destroy himself? I think he will, when he learns what has happened. Oh, I think he will. Will it not half-kill him to know this? A friend once said those words, thought those words, a variation of those words. And now the end is coming. Before it does, I will take from Harry everything that he has loved. And when I reveal how deep my claws have sunk, how he and no other is responsible for the harvest I have reaped, he will kill himself, and my magic will come home to me."

Falco remained silent until his eloquence ended. Then he shook his head, and said, “You are mad, Tom. But it is your techniques that I need now.” He leaned forward. “I have been to the coasts, and still I cannot convince the sirens to listen to me. What did you say to persuade them?”

It took a long moment for Lord Voldemort to subdue his amusement, to stop dreaming of the distant day when his magic would be all his again, to diminish his irritation at being called by a Muggle name. But in the end, he managed. He would tell the fool Falco how to control the sirens, how to raise them. Of course he would. Using a brilliant plan like that only worked once. Harry would rise against Falco, and destroy him, because Falco was not willing to give himself fully to the Dark.

Oh, yes, he told him, did Lord Voldemort, and all the time the snake swayed beside him and dreamed of the end.

Out of that end, there would be no morning, but only silence eternal, in an eternal night.

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Harry shut his mouth and looked expectantly across the room. Jing-Xi sat with her head bowed, her long dark hair playing hide-and-seek around the arms of her chair, her breathing deep and peaceful. Harry hoped he hadn't said something wrong, or, worse, said something boring and sent her to sleep.

But, in a moment, she looked up and shook her head, sending her hair scattering in other directions. Harry was almost sure he heard it squeal as it bounced, but, if so, it was probably another sign of her magic, rather than a spell she had set. Why would she want her hair to squeal when it bounced?

"That is a very good expression of what it means when a Light Lord cares for his people, Harry." Her face wore the faintest edge of a smile, as if she were proud of him and trying not to show it. "That you care for the people of Britain in such a way—and other creatures as well—is a good sign for the future. The others will be more inclined to accept you into the Pact when the time comes."

Harry nodded. "Good." And then he paused.

"Whatever matter of magic concerns you, Harry," Jing-Xi said, and leaned forward, "you must feel free to speak to me of it. There are things I can tell you that no one else can, that no one else will—not from any malicious, lying intent, but simply because they do not know how we exist, at this level."

Harry nodded again. He told himself that Jing-Xi's phrasing should not make him uneasy. After all, Lord-level was a common term for someone with his might in magic.

But it still made him wary, any implication that he was above others, inherently superior to them.

"I was wondering what will happen with my vates influence spreading outside of Britain," he said, and made a nervous gesture that he hoped aimed, vaguely, in the direction of Africa. "Already a few species like karkadanns can tear loose from their webs and come to me. Won't that cause conflict in other countries? If there's a Lord in

the karkadann territory who becomes annoyed at me, how does that affect the Pact?”

“Currently, we have no solution for such a thing,” Jing-Xi said. “As I told you, you are the first vates since the Pact was formed, Harry, since we began to look beyond the boundaries of our own magical communities and think that we owed the world a responsibility to join together. So, yes, it might mean open conflict if that happened and you annoyed a Lord or Lady.” She hummed under her breath, as though thinking. “Though, truly, I would not think it the karkadanns you should be wary of. Monika, the Dark Lady in Austria, makes it her habit to breed magical creatures—“

“I thought that was illegal,” Harry said.

“Monika has never cared overmuch about legalities,” said Jing-Xi, as if that should explain everything. “Excepting the Pact, of course. But she breeds them, and is inevitably dissatisfied with them, and puts them aside, bound in a web. You are her natural enemy.”

Harry groaned and tilted his head back. There were times, he had to admit as he massaged his brow with his silver hand, when he did wish that he hadn’t chosen such a difficult path to walk as the vates one.

But he had, it was chosen, and there was no turning back, of course. What kind of person would he be if he did? Like it or not, he was vates, and he was in the position of Lord of the British Isles, since no one else would protect them from Voldemort. The sense of intense binding and protectiveness he’d felt when he embraced Marian and saw her unafraid of his magic had not gone away. That was what his wizarding world should be like, people touching him and taking from his magic what they needed without fear.

So he would conflict with Monika someday—if he survived his war with Voldemort. That was inevitable. Harry shouldered himself to accept the burden now. At least Monika did not have a prophetic bond with him, and perhaps she would be willing to talk instead of trying to destroy Harry immediately as Voldemort would do.

“There is another thing we must talk of, Harry.” Jing-Xi’s voice was devoid of inflection.

Harry glanced up, and saw that she had risen from her chair. She stood over him, and looked down, eyes deep and sad. Harry sat up. He did not think Jing-Xi would hurt him, but he was prepared to defend himself if she did. His magic rose around him, buzzing, and a dark cat formed, crouched, at Jing-Xi’s heels.

She smiled, then, and shook her head. “I am sorry to have frightened you, Harry,” she said. “I only wanted to make you understand how serious this matter was, but of course you would already know that.”

She moved back and sat down in her chair again, hands displayed all the while, shoulders held in an unnatural hunched posture that looked like a half-shrug. Harry, watching, finally realized that she was using the signal she had taught him meant no harm between Lords and Ladies. He exhaled and let his magic fade until the cat was less than a shadow wavering on the floor.

“My Lady,” he said. “What is it?”

“There is a more pressing concern for the other Lords and Ladies than your vates path,” she said quietly. “That has only happened in a few countries, and most of the incidents were minor—individuals tearing their webs, not whole species. Besides, most know that that would happen with any vates in the world, whether or not he was the youngest of us ever to come to power.

“But now your absorbere gift is common knowledge among them, and the way that you stand magical heir to Voldemort. You are in the mid-ranks of Lords in terms of power, Harry. But you could easily become much stronger.” Jing-Xi met his eyes. “They fear that.”

“Have you told them about me?” Harry asked. “How I was raised to hate and abhor that ability of mine?”

“I kept them quiet that way for some time,” said Jing-Xi. “But some of them are watching, and they know that you drained Unspeakables in the British Ministry of Magic. That makes them fear that you are

growing stronger, more confident, that the artificial restraints of your training are falling away.” She looked at his left hand. “And the hand is another sign. You are not a wounded little boy. You are a young Lord, not Declared, but still. As they see it, you are someone who might drain them someday, if only to defend his islands.”

Harry clasped his hands around the arms of his chair. “I see,” he said in a neutral voice. “Would it reassure them if I pretended to go backwards? Suddenly lose my confidence in public, wear a glamour that makes it look as if I don’t have the silver hand, and express concern about my absorbere gift?”

Jing-Xi shook her head. “They wouldn’t believe it, not now. Most of them have an idea how far you’ve come.”

“Then what should I do?” Harry spoke the words in a voice that he kept free of frustration, and thanked Joseph for that blessing. Dealing with the stubborn Seer was good practice for dealing with the whole of the obstinate, frustrating, resentment-causing world in general.

“You should press forward,” said Jing-Xi. “But do it with an eye on the future, Harry, and an eye on the world. They have spies in or near Britain who can pass information to them about you. You should have spies on them in return.”

“I do have a spy network that could span Europe, potentially,” said Harry, thinking of the Opallines. At one time, they’d started to open talks in other wizarding communities for him, but most of those had come to nothing; the official reasoning was that the other wizards saw how well Harry was doing with his war and determined he didn’t need their help. “If that would do.”

“It would be a beginning,” Jing-Xi acknowledged. “But you will need more in the end, Harry. You will need to grow.”

Harry sighed. “And you think I’ll be alive in a few years to care about this?”

He meant it as a joke, but it made Jing-Xi lean forward and say, “Quite honestly? You do not dare plan otherwise, Harry. On the

morning that you defeat Voldemort, you will need to be ready to defend yourself again.”

Harry frowned. “Why? You think that Monika would choose that moment to make her move?”

Jing-Xi shook her head. “When the tunnel between you and Voldemort collapses and the transfer of his magic to you is complete, I fully expect you to be one of the strongest wizards in the world, because Voldemort is. There may be someone who would think that he or she could catch you off guard in that moment, reeling, drunk with victory, and not yet in control of your magic.”

Some of Jing-Xi’s stranger training made sense then, especially the parts where she had encouraged him to visualize tasks that would strain his power, and sometimes even to perform them. “You’re preparing me for that moment,” Harry whispered. “You’re trying to get me used to carrying more magic than I carry now.”

“Yes.”

Harry leaned back in his chair and stared off into space. He had not considered that before, not really. He had simply assumed that once Voldemort died, he would have control of the power that he’d had until the end of fourth year, when Voldemort had resurrected himself and established the tunnel.

But if there were more—

I don’t want it.

But wanting and not wanting had very little to do with his fate, Harry had to acknowledge. He had still not found a way around the sacrifices for the Horcruxes, but he had listened, reluctantly, to Regulus’s talk about the warded shack near the Riddle house which evidently contained one of them. They should secure that Horcrux, Regulus had argued, before Voldemort either guessed or decided that they knew about it and moved it to safety elsewhere. Voldemort had seemingly forgotten that Harry would need to pass close by that

tumbledown house to come to the graveyard last Midwinter, but he might remember at any moment.

They were going to try for that Horcrux this weekend. Harry might have resisted, but he had other plans in motion, too, and the love and liveliness he had felt when he looked into Marian's eyes, and even Jacinth's, prompted him towards this particular action. There was nothing that said he had to kill someone to cleanse that Horcrux the moment he had it. If he could have it, if he could study it, then it might become easier to find a way around the Unassailable Curse.

"They'll have to get used to it, I suppose," he told Jing-Xi. "And so will I."

Jing-Xi smiled, and it was a proud smile, like a banner or a call to war. "Indeed."

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Connor hung upside down from his Firebolt, because he could.

Then he righted himself and continued on around the Pitch. No one else was out to see and contest him for the air. An odd mixture of rain and slush was falling, at once cold enough to get through most cloth and heavy enough to break many students' warming charms, and Katie had called the Gryffindor team's practice off early. It wasn't a particularly urgent time of year, either. They'd beat Hufflepuff handily a few weeks ago, and the match with Ravenclaw was three months away.

Connor didn't have to go inside with the rest of them if he didn't want to, though. He'd tossed the Snitch away just as Katie signaled for them to leave the Pitch, and then claimed he would find it and bring it in again. The rest had just shrugged and left him to it.

Since then, he'd seen the Snitch several times, even trailing at his heel like a lost puppy. It was there now. Connor spun the Firebolt towards it, and of course it darted away. But it didn't go far. Connor speculated idly that it didn't like the wet and the cold any more than he did.

He wondered why he'd wanted to remain outside. Surely he could think just as well inside, next to a warm fire, with Parvati curled up next to him, her hair wreathed around his neck and her head resting in the crook of his throat.

The thought made Connor smile, until a dash of rain, driven by a brisk March wind, hit him. He spluttered and shook his head, and went back to flying around, now and then hanging upside-down to see if that would drive these thoughts from his head. It didn't help, but then, Connor was slowly becoming resigned to the idea that nothing would.

He circled the middle of the Pitch in tight little rings, the Firebolt obedient beneath him, and finally admitted it to himself:

The noticing hadn't gone away.

He was still seeing things, even when he didn't look for them. He'd noticed a shy little Hufflepuff fifth-year who fancied Neville, even though she never seemed to blush or giggle when he was around. He'd noticed Luna Lovegood and Padma Patil talking more and more often, their hands brushing against each other, Luna actually seeming to notice Padma at least as often as she did the tables in the Great Hall. He'd noticed the mornings when Draco and Harry were snappish with one another, the mornings when they sported love bites, and the mornings when they both grinned like fools.

But it wasn't just noticing people falling in love and probably snogging, which would have been bad enough. Connor had turned around the other day and caught a glimpse of Millicent Bulstrode at the Slytherin table. He knew her, of course. She ate things. She was there. She was the daughter of one of Harry's allies. He knew a bit about her.

He'd never realized that she had a faint smile on her face in the mornings, when she didn't look quite awake, and was slowly eating her food instead of tearing it apart. He'd always thought it was a smirk, but it wasn't. It was a smile.

Connor dived at the grass, almost hoping to scrape through a puddle and toss muddy water into his face. It didn't happen, though, trained

Seeker reflexes twitching him out of danger before he reached the ground and sending him back into the air.

He'd noticed that Ernie Macmillan, a conceited Hufflepuff boor, was actually harmless. Oh, he might brag about the purity of his family, but he didn't call anybody 'Mudblood.' He collected Chocolate Frog cards and went about his day with a small smile on his face, and he would tell anyone who asked him, at great length, about the small shop he intended to open when he left Hogwarts, mostly to make collecting Chocolate Frog cards and other small things easier. He would probably adapt to the changed world that the Grand Unified Theory created, Connor thought, and with much less fuss than other purebloods. He didn't see anything worth making a fuss about, unless it actually happened to him.

He saw the way Ron and Ginny fought, especially about her dating Dean now—one would have to be blind to miss a Weasley spat in Gryffindor Tower—but now he saw the way they crept back together, too, sometimes exchanging a smile the next day, sometimes talking to each other as if the fight had never happened. Connor wasn't sure they ever forgave each other, but they did forget. The Burrow wasn't an endless stew of boiling tempers, he had always known that, but now he knew why it wasn't.

He'd realized that Terry Boot was actually a fairly good artist. He never drew anything beautiful, but he drew useful things, like small diagrams of wand movements that were good for studying spells. He could dash off a complicated drawing of a human wrist and arm in three minutes, and then, if someone praised him, he'd look at them in polite incomprehension, as if accepting compliments on the way he breathed. Art did seem to be that instinctive to him, Connor thought.

He'd seen the dark circles beneath Peter's eyes, one day when they were alone for Animagus training, and commented on them before he could help himself. He was sure Peter was having bad dreams, and he remembered what that had meant for Sirius. Even Peter reassuring him, with some amusement, that he did not have Voldemort in his head attempting to possess him had not lessened Connor's worry.

They'd discovered his Animagus form that same day—a wild boar—but Connor's heart wasn't in his rejoicing.

And, worst of all—

Connor tried zipping very fast in several directions, on the off-chance that if he flew away from the thought, he didn't have to think it. But the thoughts were in his own head, and came with him, and slapped into the back of his head.

He was starting to think that Draco Malfoy could be a tolerable person outside of his function in making Harry happy.

He didn't know what had first given him that impression, infuriatingly. He saw the way Draco watched other people, with more observant curiosity than the malice that Connor had given him credit for. He saw the way he'd thrown himself into Animagus training; he could care about a study he had no guarantee would give him some kind of personal advantage, then. Of course, Connor was still determined to transform first, but that was beside the point.

The point was that he was starting to see all these little things, and it made life very complicated. He couldn't just believe people were good and evil any more. He saw frailties and weaknesses among people who weren't Gryffindors or Light wizards that awoke his compassion, and strengths that the people he loved best didn't have.

If I could stop noticing things, Connor thought, hanging upside-down once more in the hope that the blood rush to his brain would drown his thoughts, I could stop growing up, or whatever it is I'm doing. That would be pleasant.

“Connor Potter! You come down here this instant!”

The shout carried clearly through the storm that had now, mostly, translated to rain. Connor flipped himself back over in astonishment and blinked at the Pitch, absently thanking Merlin that he didn't wear glasses like Harry.

Parvati stood at the edge of the Pitch, arms folded as she glared up at him. Connor snatched the Snitch, skimmed down the Firebolt towards her, and opened his mouth to explain.

“What you were thinking, flying in weather like this, I’ll never know,” Parvati said flatly, and seized his arm. “It’s a long way from the first day of spring, you realize?”

“Of course I realize—ow!”

She’d tugged him along, practically carrying him off his feet. “But maybe it’s a good thing,” she added, with manic cheer. “That means that you get to practice those drying charms I showed you the other day on your Quidditch gear, since the house elves won’t be washing it.”

“Parvatiiii,” Connor whinged.

She turned and faced him, eyebrow raised. “Yes?”

Connor went silent at the look on her face, the worry behind her eyes. And a small fire that had nothing to do with imaginings of the Gryffindor common room took up residence in his belly.

If I’m noticing other people, I also get noticed.

He leaned forward and kissed her. His lips were cold and wet, but she gave only a muffled protest before kissing him back.

Connor slid his arms around her, dropping the Firebolt to the ground, and had a final thought before he became too busy for thinking.

Maybe growing up isn’t so bad.

Chapter Seventy-One: Blood of Slytherin

“Promise me you’ll stay behind me when we Apparate in.”

Regulus’s voice was tolerant. “Harry, I’m not going to promise you that.”

Harry glared at him. “Voldemort could have left traps around the shack that would reach out to the Dark Mark—“

In answer, Regulus drew his left sleeve back, showing Harry the Grim that crouched on his forearm in place of a snake and skull. “I wish him good luck trying to reclaim me from Death,” he said. “You should be more worried about Severus, and yet you aren’t snapping at him and trying to make him follow you like a duckling.”

“That’s because he knows what would happen if he tried,” said Snape, striding into his office. Because he was in the mood to notice things like that, Harry noticed that almost no trace of a limp remained in his walk; the damage he had taken in the Chamber of Secrets more than a year ago was healed. Snape saw him noticing and gave him a flat stare. Harry hissed at him through bared teeth.

He could easily name the feelings that bubbled inside him as he paced back and forth between the hearth and Snape’s door. Protectiveness, anger at the mere thought of someone who followed him being hurt, and determination to be the one at the front, wielding the magic that would be more likely to spare his life and shield those who followed after. The problem was that he couldn’t explain them in a way that made them acceptable to the people he wanted to guard.

Regulus had quietly refused to let Harry go to the shack without him. He’d said that, as the one who’d brought the news of the Horcruxes, he had the right to see their capture of one through. And if he could sense anything about the Dark magic around the shack which Harry might not notice—an upbringing among Dark purebloods had to be good for something, he’d said—then he should test spells before Harry could.

Snape was coming. Harry had not been able to dissuade him. His Dark Mark had not tingled or burned in weeks, he said; there was no sign that Voldemort was trying to interact with it. His dreams had retreated into normal nightmares or bizarre interminglings of ordinary life and image-play. He had nothing to weaken him, and that meant he seemed to have fastened more firmly than ever onto the idea of becoming Harry's father, not just his guardian.

Draco was coming. Harry had looked into his eyes after he opened his mouth to protest, and shut it again, knowing better than to continue.

Argutus would come, because his scales might reflect hidden spells contained in the wards around the shack. In fact, he slithered in through the open door now and draped himself happily around Harry's shoulders. "Here I am," he said. "You may cease your waiting for me." His tongue flickered, once, and he jerked his head towards Harry. "You smell of anger and frustration. Why?"

Harry sighed and stroked the snake's head, ignoring Regulus's and Snape's piercing stares. At least they couldn't understand him when he said something in Parseltongue. "I don't want anyone else to be hurt. I—I remember the wards around the house as incredibly Dark, giving me a conviction that I would be cursed if I entered that I've never felt anywhere else. And Voldemort could have strengthened them or put in spells that only I am strong enough to oppose. I don't want anyone else taking the risk or becoming the sacrifice"

The Omen snake flicked his tongue against Harry's cheek, light as a kiss. "This is about them becoming sacrifices for the Horcruxes." Harry had told him about that, but only after emphasizing, repeatedly, that this was not an indication he wanted Argutus to make the decision Sylarana had. "You don't want to allow them to make their own decisions."

Harry winced. It sounded harsher in Parseltongue than it ever would in English. "I—"

Peter entered then, with Draco at his side and Henrietta not far behind. Between them, Peter and Henrietta had an unequaled

knowledge of the theory behind Dark magic, they had told him. Snape might have more practical experience with it, but Henrietta had experimented and Peter had studied obscure meanings and symbols that they could need to unlock the riddles of Voldemort's curses.

Draco stepped away from Peter and locked eyes with Harry. Harry glanced away miserably, knowing he had been seen.

A pair of arms slipped around his waist, and Draco sighed into his ear. "You're making this a lot harder than it needs to be, you know," he murmured at Harry. A stir at the door indicated the arrival of Owen and Syrinx, Harry knew, but he didn't look up or back, if only because he would have rammed his head into Draco's chin. "You have your role to play, and we have ours. And if we want to be at your side when you go into danger, you don't have the right to shove us away."

"I know." Harry sounded pathetic. Responding to the tone in his voice, rather than the words—so far, he'd been frustrated in his efforts to learn English—Argutus rubbed against Harry's chin. Harry stroked his skin with his flesh hand, since the silver one didn't transmit much warmth as yet. "But this is probably the deepest instinct, Draco, the one I can't shake. It's one thing to theorize in a library about what needs to happen when we find a Horcrux. It's another thing altogether to go into battle with one and not take the point, not be the guardian, the defender—"

"The sacrifice."

Harry jerked against his hold, but Draco had as firm a grip on him as he'd ever achieved. "I wasn't thinking of it like that."

"That's all right," said Draco cheerfully. "I'll think of it like that for you. You can't just be the sacrifice and be done with it, you selfish idiot. You can't just protect people, either. We chose to be in this fight, and we'll fight beside you if we want. And your life is more important to the wizarding world than any single person's here." Harry shook his head automatically, and one of Draco's hands shifted up to cover his mouth. "Ah, ah, just listen. And we're important to you, and that means that we shouldn't carelessly risk our lives, either, because our dying would make you feel like you wanted to die. So it has to be a balance, Harry.

He saw many small things, things he would have been unaware of a few months ago when he was sunk in melancholy. Harry twisted his head from side to side constantly, his chin up and his eyes seeking out those who followed him. His hand now and then reached back and brushed Regulus's robe or Snape's arm or Draco's hip. When he could, he walked in front of the others, or at least to the front, talking to Owen Rosier-Henlin and edging a bit ahead of him. He even moved his torso so as to shield most of his snake behind him.

Putting himself in the way of any danger that might strike us from that direction, Snape thought. Following his instincts ingrained into him from childhood—only this time, it's not just his brother he's protecting.

But things had changed. Harry would have argued more, at one time, or simply sneaked out of the school and Apparated himself to the shack, without letting anyone else come along with him into danger. Snape's lips still tightened as he remembered the way Harry had forced him to stay behind in his third year, when he'd gone tearing into the Shrieking Shack to confront Voldemort in Sirius Black's body.

If he has altered, so have we. Snape let his fingers brush the wand that rode in the holster on his waist. We can work with his magic now, instead of having to shelter behind it or coax him to use it.

And, resolved though I might be to letting him make mistakes, he shall not suffer their consequences unshielded.

The last months had been good for at least that one thing, Snape thought. They had taught him what it felt like to have only one person in the world who cared for him—Harry—and reminded him of his Death Eater days, when there had been another, Regulus, he thought lost forever.

Anyone who tried to kill Harry as Voldemort had, apparently, killed Regulus would have Severus Snape's spells to get through.

And if Harry did not like that, he could be stunned and dragged unconscious back to Hogwarts, and then delegate such tasks as this to the trustworthy, rather than go on any more adventures.

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Harry arrived with a larger bump than he would have liked; a small mound of projecting earth on the hillside had fallen away from where he remembered it. Well, that and Draco had apparently tried to Apparate by himself halfway through Harry Side-Along Apparating him.

“Draco,” he said in annoyance, turning around. Argutus was twining up and down like a dancer, looking at everything new in delight, and promptly unwound himself from Harry to vanish into the piled leaves.

Draco looked at him in complete unconcern, picking twigs out of his hair. “What?” he asked. “It’s time that I learned how to Apparate, too. I’m almost seventeen, and I don’t need you to drag me like a child everywhere.”

Harry settled for glaring at him, and turned to watch for signs of Muggle intrusion or wizard notice. The hillside's trees were still bare, concealing slushy patches of half-melted snow, but a freezing rain had begun to fall, and Harry doubted anyone would come out to see them despite the scant cover. He counted the landings behind him, and then the pairs of footsteps, and relaxed a bit. Everyone had made the transition safely.

Syrinx came up beside him, one hand in her robe pocket. Harry knew she was touching a small golden kitten that Laura had sent her, which could scout for danger in an unfamiliar place. Her head turned and her eyes locked with Harry's, calm and blank. "Ready, sir?" she asked.

Harry nodded. Syrinx took out the kitten, put it on the ground, and whispered instructions into the pricked metallic ear. The kitten scampered off immediately into the leaves and the wet, and faded from sight. Harry had thought the gold would reflect the light better than it apparently did.

“He’ll warn me if someone else shows up,” said Syrix, and touched the earring that clung to her left lobe. Now that Harry thought about it, the kitten had been wearing one, too.

He chided himself for not noticing a detail like that. On a task like this, not noticing things could get someone else rapidly killed.

But he’d had no choice about their coming, unless he used conjured ropes or binding spells to make them stay behind. He collected them all with his glance, and then nodded down the hill towards the place where he remembered the house being.

“Syrix will be watching for traps,” he said quietly. “So will Argutus, and so will I. But Voldemort may have left some we can’t locate immediately, or which are too subtle for the usual means of detection. Watch out, please. Don’t go charging ahead. Wands out.” That was useful only for Draco, though, since everyone else had already drawn his or her wand. Henrietta was looking around with a faintly wistful expression on her face, as if she wanted someone to blast now.

Harry led, Syrix and Draco just slightly behind him. There might have been arguments about that. He didn’t let there be. He also ignored the freezing rain on his skin, though he could hear a few muttered warming charms behind him. He needed to watch out for magic, and the best way to do that was not through a shield of charms.

Jing-Xi had taught him to focus, to sharpen his sight, and pick out spells from the litter of the mundane and low-level natural magic around them. It was a skill Harry had used during his first year at Hogwarts, but not truly since; he’d grown so accustomed to the spells in Hogwarts that he could ignore them as he did the general shape of the stones and the light of the torches.

Now he made himself see, and not merely look. His eyes swept trunks and slippery grass and the trailing edges of wizard robes and trainers and boots, and then came back again, circling as restlessly as a young werewolf. The rain made no difference to the spells he could see this way. It would not have unless it were a magical storm,

but his training gave him an extra edge, too, insuring that the cold didn't distract him as he searched.

They neared the shack, and still Harry saw nothing outside the utter black hole of Dark that was the house itself and the flickering flames of his companions' magic. But he didn't care. There could always be something lurking he hadn't uncovered. He stared at every trailing root, every fluttering movement in the trees, every shift of the soil, and refused to let anyone go ahead of him no matter how much they—well, all right, Draco—pushed at him to do so. Voldemort was cunning, if not intelligent. He could have set traps.

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"Indigena!"

She had been reading in the garden, her skin enjoying the impact of the wetness and a Dry-Shield Charm keeping the pages unharmed, but she put down the book at once and vaulted into the burrow when her Lord called her. She slid down the steps more than she descended them, vines uncoiling from beneath the skin of her legs and clutching into the dirt. As she landed a few feet away from Voldemort on the dirt floor of the tunnel, she asked, "My Lord?"

"Someone approaches the ring, Indigena."

The ring? She had been reading about circular components of the golden bridle spell, and for a moment her mind tried to present her with a diagram. But then she remembered the only thing that would have put her Lord into this much of a panic, helped along, perhaps, by the tight clutch of his hands on the golden cup. Someone was approaching the small house not far away where he had hidden the ring of the House of Gaunt, a hereditary treasure of his family and thus of Slytherin's bloodline. And a Horcrux, of course.

An Unassailable Curse protected it, and a special surprise that no one outside of Lord Voldemort and she herself knew about, but Indigena, thinking, could see why the Dark Lord might be afraid that this particular person could pass the Unassailable Curse, if—

“Harry,” said Voldemort, and spat. The spittle landed on the earth and sank into it with a sizzling sound. It took everything Indigena had to keep from flinching back. Under her shoulders, her tendrils curled close for protection, and the rose around her wrist tried to sink into her skin.

“Do you wish me to go to the house, my lord, and protect it?” Indigena asked. She had not had time, between tending her Lord and studying, to make every tree on the hillside into her devotee, but she was near it. The trees would not obey her commands perfectly if she asked them to attack Harry and whoever he might have brought with him, but they could slow him down.

“No,” said Voldemort, a low snarl in the back of his throat. “The idea that Harry could have learned about Horcruxes, and I not sensed it, with what I know—inconceivable. And yet—” He closed his eyes, and his body shuddered and went limp. Indigena waited, one hand braced on the floor and the other clutching her wand. She would go if she had to, she was mad to go if it meant that Harry had somehow discovered the secret of her Lord’s immortality, but she could not act without orders. She forced herself to concentrate on slowing the sick churning in her stomach, rather than doing anything else.

Voldemort was back, then, and he let out a long, low howl that shuddered through the chamber. Indigena felt his power spring up, blowing around him like a wind, and then drain away again through the hole in his magical core. She sighed. Until he could find a way to seal the hole, or convince Harry to undo the curse, her Lord could act only by using others as his hands and feet.

“Indigena,” he said, when the wind had died.

“Yes, my lord?”

“He knows,” said Voldemort flatly. “But if you attack, he will know that I know that he knows. I do not wish this to happen. And if I use the easiest weapon to hand, then I reveal myself too soon, and I cannot destroy all that he has loved.” He paused a long moment, then said, “It must be risked. Use the golden bridle, Indigena.”

She knew better than to protest. Besides, Harry might be to the house by now, and trying to break the Unassailable Curse. If he found its vulnerability—a vulnerability that the Dark Lord could never have foreseen when he cast it—then he might break it, or be able to guess how he could do so.

She sat down on the ground and began to speak the opening incantations of the golden bridle. She drew her wand in a circle around her all the while, and her plants sank into the soil to anchor her, and her left forearm flared and tingled and opened to a flow of bladed power.

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Harry eyed the house. Closer to it, the feeling of evil, the stink of vicious Dark magic, grew worse. He had the urge to bare his teeth and whine. He knew now why Light wizards sometimes insisted that all Dark Arts were wrong. If they had encountered magic like this, they had a point.

The curses cast a steady feeling of doom and warning to stay away into the air. If was no wonder, Harry thought, that Muggles had never tried to knock the shack down, or explore it, even if they had been curious about it or wanted to build something here. Muggles were mad for building things.

The hillside remained untouched. Harry summoned his magic. Still he could see no spells implanted in the soil around the house, and he was running out of excuses to stand where he was. He could easily have remained there all day if it meant protecting his companions from danger, but they would not understand.

The house was still the ruin he remembered from more than a year ago, with no sign that anyone had been here since. Frozen mud caked the threshold and clung to the base of the walls. Harry stepped nearer, and nearer, and then reached out and laid his silver hand on the door.

Magic exploded all about the house in a silent lightning storm. Acid that would have devoured flesh leaped from the door. Harry already

had shields up, snapping, singing, spreading, in response, and the acid splattered against the air a few inches from his and Syrinx's faces.

Some had hit his silver hand, he saw, when he looked. But it did not work on metal as it would have on meat. It simply slid down, sullenly. Harry shook his wrist to get it off, and then studied the house again. He could make out the spell that had concealed the acid ward now, so dim and close-woven with the general trceries of Dark magic that trying to detect it was like trying to see a Granian in stormclouds. He grimaced.

"Harry!"

Draco had grabbed his shoulder and shaken it hard. Harry turned around with a leap. "What?" he demanded, picturing danger coming up behind him, one of the group missing, someone—

"Are you all right, you fucking idiot?" Draco had seized his cheeks and was staring at him. Harry felt his face flush. He tried to pull his head free. Draco wouldn't let him go. Harry had to drive magic into his own limbs so that he could pull away.

"Of course," he said. "I would have told you if I wasn't." He studied their pale, silent faces—even Syrinx looked as if she had seen him fall off a cliff—and realized then that the acid had shocked them. He snorted. "I hardly expected to get to the Horcrux without triggering a few wards," he reassured them.

Draco made a strangled sound. Harry looked at him. "What?"

Draco pursed his lips together and shook his head. Harry frowned, annoyed. He can be that way, then. He faced the house again, and this time let his concentration on the rest of the world slip away, so that the house became the center of his vision. Then he sharpened the intangible "light" by which he saw magic, and some Dark spells he had missed before sprang out, pulsing.

The sheer scope and scale of the curses wrought on the house to keep intruders out made Harry dizzy. It was more than a web, it was

a nightmare of thorns and briars of spells intercutting each other, intersecting in knots that made it seem as if they had edges, and then turning away again and speeding off into the air at impossible angles. There was probably a key somewhere, one strand that could be tugged to make it fall apart—Voldemort would not want to be held away from one of his Horcruxes if he had to fetch it quickly—but Harry had no idea where it would be.

Or it could just be that the Dark Lord was immune to all the spells on the house. With the scale of his study in other countries, and just how many spells Harry didn't recognize and thought were probably Egyptian or New Zealand magic, it was entirely possible.

"I should have brought Thomas," he muttered, taking a step forward. "Or Jing-Xi."

"Harry!"

He glanced up. Regulus had pressed forward, and was kneeling next to the house, carefully keeping his hands inches from even the smallest of the thorn-spells. He had one hand clamped on his left arm, over the Grim mark. The Grim's shadow splayed in front of him, sniffing curiously at the shack.

Harry walked over to him. Regulus glanced up. "There's an Unassailable Curse here," he said softly.

Harry felt his face drain of blood. "You're sure?"

Regulus nodded and passed a hand over his eyes. "Death taught me to recognize them," he said. "She thought—well, she thought I might need the knowledge." He laughed, but the laughter, to Harry, had a hollow sound, and for a moment he felt the weight of what they faced threaten to overwhelm him. "Why, I can't imagine," Regulus added, with a sarcasm Harry would have thought more fitting for Sirius.

"Is it a curse that someone would have to die to break?" Harry asked quietly.

“No,” said Regulus. “I suspect he wouldn’t want that, just in case one of his Death Eaters had to retrieve the Horcrux or he came alone, once. And it isn’t the kind of curse one casts casually, that.” He drew his wand. “I’ve been studying Unassailable Curses,” he explained out of the corner of his mouth. “Still no way around them that I can find.” He caught Harry’s eyes in a brief, intense glance that Harry turned away from. “But I can identify what their major components might be.”

He extended his wand towards a thin dark line that looked no different from most of the other spells to Harry, except that it coiled around most of the thorns in a pattern like a lazy figure eight. “Vomica erinyos comperta!”

The curse blazed to life. Harry grimaced and put his flesh hand in front of his eyes. The blaze was manifested as thick, oily flames.

“Blood,” said Regulus.

“Vampires?” Harry asked, when he thought he could bear the sight of the curse afire. “Or we have to bleed someone to get inside?” Blood magic had been part of the protection for the locket Horcrux, Regulus had told him.

Regulus shook his head. “Not that kind of blood,” he said. “I should have said—heritage.” He turned his wand around, frowning, then cast a few more incantations. The curse blazed twice and was still once. Regulus stared, and then laughed. Harry laid the silver hand on his shoulder. It made him sick to hear such a sound from Regulus.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I asked if the curse was tied to the heritage of a specific family,” Regulus replied. “It seemed there were few families he could have used. Most of his Death Eaters came from diverse backgrounds. Sure enough. He used his own.” He glanced at Harry again. “Only the blood of Slytherin can break that curse.”

“And he’s the only descendant of Slytherin left,” Harry muttered, remembering what the shadow of Tom Riddle had told him when he tried to control the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. A Parselmouth

descended from Slytherin had had to control that snake, no one else.
"Bastard."

"Rather."

Harry rapped his flesh hand against his knee. "Are there any other Unassailable Curses on the shack itself?"

Regulus shook his head. "Only that one."

"Then we need to know a way to break that one, most of all," Harry breathed. "I can get Thomas and come back to study the others." He stared for a moment more, then turned to Snape. "Severus, I'll meet your eyes and transfer the memory of what the spells on the house look like to you. Then you plant it in the minds of the others with Legilimency." He glanced quickly at Draco, Regulus, Peter, Henrietta, and Owen. Syrinx stood off to the side, eyes slightly closed as she listened to the golden kitten's reports. "I want you to tell me if you recognize any of the spells. If not, just prepare to hold the memory so that we can study it when we get back to Hogwarts."

"But you don't want us to break the spells if we recognize one?" Henrietta asked hopefully.

Harry shook his head. "Destroying one spell we do know might trigger the spells we don't. And I think we may only get one chance to approach what's in that house, anyway. Better to study it and then retreat and come back when we're prepared." He could feel relief growing in his chest. He wouldn't have to ask any of his companions to die for him today.

He locked eyes with Snape and reached out with his Legilimency. Snape grimaced when he received the vision, and then turned and looked at Regulus. Harry met Draco's eyes.

Syrinx jerked and cried out. Harry spun around. He had been expecting Death Eaters to appear to defend their master's Horcrux at any moment, but he had hoped they would not. Must they die after all?

“What is it?” he asked.

“The kitten’s gone.” The war witch plucked the earring from her ear and laid it on her palm, staring. “Not enough time to see anything useful, sir. Just the tip of a wand, and then he was blasted.”

“I’m sorry,” said Harry gently. He knew the Gloryflowers’ bond with their artificial animals ran deep enough that the loss of one hurt, and he felt a pulse of anxiety for Argutus. “But he died bravely, and he’s told us there’s danger.” He looked around, but saw no sign of Argutus. Closing his eyes and picturing a snake, he hissed a call to return in Parseltongue—all he could do. He had no mental bond with Argutus to compare to his one with Sylarana.

He reached out his arm to Draco, preparing to Apparate him, and hoping that this time Draco wouldn’t get it into his head that he needed to be an adult. Luckily, Draco took his arm with alacrity, and Harry turned to see the other Apparition pair forming, Syrinx stepping up to Snape without a qualm.

“ ‘And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords of life,’ ” a voice intoned from the other side of the house. “ ‘And I have something to expiate; a pettiness.’ Running away from me would be such a pettiness, Harry.”

Evan Rosier came into view, smiling. He held a glass bead with blue lines radiating from it. Harry studied the lines where they curved off into the air, and resisted the temptation to swear. If he hadn’t been concentrating so hard on the curses on the house, he might have noticed when the lines established their web. As it was, there was now an anti-Apparition shield over the immediate area, and Harry recognized the general pattern as a variant on Ariadne’s Web, the spell that had sheltered the school of Durmstrang last year. He would have to destroy or steal the glass bead in Rosier’s hand to gain control of the web.

“Do you like it?” Rosier tilted the bead in his hand, admiring it. “I have studied hard in the past year. It was something to do when I could not sleep.” He lifted his head, and his eyes were wild and dark and laughing. “ ‘Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld, now

due to be crowned again.' You have taught me what it is like to be an exiled king, Harry, and for that I must thank you. But I have missed you."

"I told you once," said Harry calmly, ignoring the drawn wands and hissed-in breaths from around him, "that the next time I saw you, I would kill you."

"Oh, yes, you did," said Rosier agreeably. "But I think that you should look at me and see what I've learned first, Harry. Pulmo dominatio!"

Harry braced himself to fling the spell back the moment it tried to get control of him; Rosier was an expert in spells that got under shields and affected the human body, like the Blood-Burning Curse that he had afflicted Harry with the first time they fought in proper battle. But Harry thought he could resist it, now.

He felt nothing. Then he heard a gasp and felt a head sag against his shoulder, and knew whose lungs Rosier had taken control of.

Draco.

The world went white. It took Harry a moment to realize it hadn't gone white just for him. His magic was flaring in a wide circle of shining fire all around him, beating in time with his own heart, closing in and turning around Rosier like a torture wheel. Rosier was watching it with an expression of childlike delight. He wagged the glass bead, as if to remind Harry of what was at stake.

"That was pretty," he remarked to Harry. "You must show me that again sometime." He paused reflectively. "Or you could bring me raspberries. I have developed a taste for them, in place of the blueberries that you never brought me."

"Let him go, Rosier," Harry said, trying to block from his mind the descriptions of what he'd read the Lung Domination Curse as doing. Victims could die slowly from lack of air, instead of quickly. Their lungs could fill with fluid, and they could drown on dry land. They—

"You should have acted more quickly," said Rosier. "You let me talk, and that is always a bad idea, Harry. How many enemies' lives will you spare while your friends die?" He smiled at him. "Let us make a wager. I say four. How many do you say?"

A curse soared over Harry's shoulder before he could recover his self-possession, aimed for the glass bead in Rosier's hand. It hit a shield Harry hadn't even seen, and shattered. Rosier laughed.

"I am much stronger now, Henrietta," he said. "My magic has increased wonderfully. Did I mention that?"

"Let him go, Rosier," Harry said. The world had become simple, as simple as the rage his wheel of fire expressed, as simple as the desperation that was slowly eating his brain from the inside out. "Let him go, and you may have whatever you wish of me." He lifted his wrists to show that he had a silver hand attached to the left one. "Do you want this? You can have it."

Rosier's eyes blazed. "You are so kind to offer your hand to me, Harry," he murmured. "But I think I want something else."

"What?"

"Do not trust him, Harry." Snape sounded like nothing human. Harry flicked him a glance and saw his magic crouched around him as a muscled shadow. "He will keep no bargain he makes."

"Do shut up, Severus," said Rosier. "You can't advise him in this situation." He turned his gaze to fix on Harry. "And I think I prefer your right hand to your left," he said, and showed his teeth. "I am hungry, I think, for red, wet flesh, and not so much for cold, hard silver."

Harry felt the waves of his emotions crashing over him. Fear and rage alternated so quickly he could hardly tell them apart any more. All he knew for certain was that Rosier might as well have gripped his own lungs with that curse. His breath came in time with Draco's needy, gasping ones behind him. He did feel Draco sag briefly, in the manner that meant he was trying his possession gift, but then he

gave a jerky sigh, and Harry knew it had failed. Probably Rosier was too insane for Draco to possess.

“Harry,” Draco whispered, and Harry bent towards him, never taking his eyes from Rosier as the air grew more and more tense. “I can’t control him, but there’s something—I can’t see it well—a golden bridle, wrung over his thoughts—if you can break that, I think—”

And then he stopped talking, and Harry looked to see his face turning blue.

He faced Rosier again, and screamed. His ring of white fire soared, leaping like a fountain, gouts of power rising and then falling right back down into place, so they looked less like fountains and more like blades as the moments wore on. Harry wanted to kill. He was mad to do so.

“No talking, no,” Rosier said. “Did I give you permission to do that? Naughty Draco.” And Draco started breathing again, but only in shallow pulses that Harry knew couldn’t sustain him. “Now, Harry, come forward and hold out your hand to me, so that I can bite your palm. I prefer my meat alive when I can get it.”

Harry moved forward, ignoring the stifled gasps and curses from behind him, never yielding Rosier’s gaze. He had a moment, and no more, to decide what he should do with the information Draco had given him.

Perhaps at another time he would have planned and plotted. But now, everything was so simple. He had to save Draco. He trusted Draco absolutely.

Thus it was that as he came to a halt and held out his hand for Rosier to eat, he leaped through his eyes, in a burst of Legilimency.

He saw at once what Draco had meant. Beyond Rosier’s eyes was not the chaos he would have expected of a mad person, the chaos that Snape had once seen in Sirius’s mind when he was being driven insane by Voldemort’s possession, but a lashing sea with a bridge

over it. The bridge resembled a golden bridle if seen from a certain angle. And underneath that bridle, the chaos fought still.

Someone had grasped Rosier's mind and constrained him to appear.

And if Harry broke the bridle, then he would be setting Rosier free to do as he willed.

Only a moment to make a decision, and Harry chose freedom. He could not do otherwise. He was vates, and the mad things, the wild things, the Dark things, they deserved their freedom, too.

And Rosier held Draco on someone else's orders.

Harry cleft the golden bridle. It withered, falling away like the phoenix web. Someone fought him for a moment, but that person was not strong enough to hold on to the spell in the face of Harry's magic. He gripped the bridle and shook it to death between his teeth.

And Rosier was free.

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Indigena gagged, feeling as though someone had punched her in the belly, and flopped on the floor of the tunnel as gracelessly as Falco dropping out of the air. She coughed and coughed and coughed again, and then moaned softly at the merciless pounding in her head.

"Indigena?"

Somehow, she roused herself and crawled to her Lord's side. His fingers felt her face, and he whispered, "Harry knows that Evan was under the bridle spell?"

She nodded, and let her head fall forward, to rest on her Lord's chest. He did not smell bad, like dirt and flowers and soft cool things. It gave Indigena the strength to summon breath to reassure him.

“But he—didn’t spend much time in Evan’s head,” she whispered. “He didn’t have time to see the source of the bridle, nor where it was attached on Evan’s body.”

“Good,” said Voldemort, his fingers clamping into her hair and on the back of her neck. “Then we will move slowly, and subtly. The others are more certain. Only our mad Evan, our broken one, needs such measures. Do not repeat the spell, and Harry cannot trace the pattern.”

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Harry felt for a moment as if he were falling into an abyss, a black, churning sea, crushed with lightning, that reared up to meet him. And then he was free himself, as Rosier’s natural insanity reasserted itself, and flung him out of his mind.

He was lying on the ground, a torn bite in the center of his palm, staring up at Rosier. There was blood on his teeth, and wildness in his eyes. And realization, if not sanity.

He dropped the glass bead and crushed it beneath his heel, all the time never taking his eyes from Harry’s. Then he aimed his wand at Draco—Harry remembered, as if in a daze, that he had not used his wand to cast the Lung Domination Curse—and shouted, “Finite Incantatem!”

Draco took a deep breath, to show Harry he could.

A timeless moment passed, swinging like a pendulum, during which Harry looked into Rosier’s eyes as he would the eyes of any wild creature he freed. He saw the same hatred he had seen there when he used the phoenix tears to heal Rosier’s wounds in the graveyard last Midwinter.

And they were enemies again, and Harry tried to make the ring of white fire race in and swallow Rosier, and Rosier leaped away, the distinctive crack of Apparition shattering into silence. Argutus’s lunge carried him futilely through empty air a second too late, and he chose, hissing, to twine about Harry instead.

Harry turned, forced himself to his feet, tamed his magic, snatched Draco close, and Apparated. The others followed without discussion. Harry knew they didn't need to be told where he was going.

He landed safely on the grass outside Hogwarts, breathing in the scent of Draco's hair, clutching him as if he would never let him go, and tasting the slide of rain over his skin and his lips.

Chapter Seventy-Two: See What Beauty Falls

Draco took a deep breath, because he could, and then another one, because he could see Harry watching him.

Harry had lingered to tell the Headmistress what had happened and to answer questions from the others as they arrived, with bare courtesy. Regulus had stepped back and prudently let him go when his magic sprouted from his face in bizarre bronze tendrils. Draco was of the opinion that this was the right thing to do.

And not only because Harry would be calmer if not forced to answer question after question, of course. Also so that Harry could take care of him.

It was a wonderful feeling, to know that at that moment, he was the center of Harry's world and Harry would have done anything to protect him. He'd taken Draco back to their bedroom and conjured food for him from a robe that he never wore anymore. Draco had protested at first, expecting it to taste like dust, but in fact it tasted like grapes. He'd had to eye Harry sideways and wonder how much of what he did in class failed not because he didn't have the talent but because he was trying to channel raw power through the conduits of spells too small for it.

Harry had fed him the grapes, eyes so intent that Draco had felt unable to talk. Meanwhile, his magic roamed the room, snakes twitching their tails and hissing whenever Harry looked at them. Sometimes Harry hissed back, and sometimes he talked to Argutus, but for the most part he kept up a low murmuring of constant reassurances that Draco could only make out some of the time.

"Love you...would have torn him apart if he hurt you more than that...should have torn him apart the moment I saw him...Merlin, Draco, no end to the things I would do for you...has to be a better way to protect you...felt as if my mind was ripping out of my skull when I knew that he'd hit you with that spell...so clever, even in the middle of that pain, to feel the golden bridle in his mind and be able to tell it to me..."

Draco leaned back on the bed and let Harry touch him with his hands when the words weren't enough any more. For the most part, Harry used the right one, but Draco reached up and clasped his left wrist, letting him know without words that the silver was welcome. And it was; the combination of Harry's magic working to bind it to his body and a warming charm made it only a little stiffer and smoother than Harry's right hand.

Draco reveled in the fact that no one else would ever know what the touch of those hands felt like, and in the gaze Harry gave him all the while, as if he were the most precious thing ever to exist, treasure and lover and friend all rolled up into one. He could have asked Harry to do anything at that moment, and he would have done it.

He didn't intend to use that power, of course, except to save Harry's life if necessary. But he didn't care. The point was that he had it, and he could have used it. Draco closed his eyes, and twitched a bit as Harry spelled his clothes away and went to work, kneading his skin and breathing over every sensitive place on his body and caressing his groin as if he thought that it would vanish in the next moment.

The other times they'd bedded each other stood out clear and sharp in Draco's mind, mosaics of leaps and angles. This one didn't. This one was curved, blurred, blending, sliding from a moment of pleasure to another moment of pleasure, colors exploding behind his eyes, pleasure soaking his belly from the inside and his hands and his chest and his legs and then his belly from the outside.

Harry gathered him close when he was done. He used his hands, but other than that, he might have shifted Draco's weight by main force or magic; Draco couldn't open his eyes to see. He lifted his head for a kiss, and it was there. He leaned his head on Harry's shoulder, and it was there.

He couldn't open his eyes, he was so sated, but he could imagine the picture Harry must make, crouched over him, eyes blazing as he stared at the far wall and, Draco hoped, plotted vengeance on Rosier.

He did wish he hadn't had to go through such an experience as the Lung Domination Curse to get this kind of treatment, Draco reflected

drowsily. But he had had his place in Harry's life reconfirmed in a very pleasant way, and now he drifted on the edge of bliss. He favored giving up all thought about his dangerous experience today in order to flirt with sleep.

Sleep won, and seduced him—though not as thoroughly as Harry had—into a slumber that Draco felt as a leaping wave of blackness creeping up from his legs. He might have tensed when it passed over his chest and above his still-laboring lungs, but he did not. He was comfortable, and he was relaxed, and then he was gone.

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Harry waited until he was sure Draco was asleep to lower the barriers over his magic.

The air all around him went hot, bright, blazing, like a desert at noonday. Harry saw golden trees take form on the wall, but they looked blasted and blistered, as if they had stood too long in that fierce sun. Snakes looped through them, but their heads and tails were both narrower, and they showed fangs as they moved. Lynxes were nowhere in sight.

The black cats were everywhere. One of them jumped up on the bed and nudged at Draco, causing Harry to draw him more tightly into his arms, then lifted its head and locked Harry's gaze, green eye to green eye.

Harry saw the rage there, and he met it, because he had to, in a struggle only slightly less fierce than the one with Rosier had been. He swung between the desire, the need, to find and kill Evan Rosier so he could never do something like that to Draco again. And not far behind the anger was the desperate, maddened despair. Draco would be in danger every time they went into battle, unless Harry did something about it. And it was up to Harry to do something about it, because he was the reason Draco was in danger. If he had not cared about Draco so much, then his enemies would not have concentrated on Draco and tried to kill him.

He knew he could not solve either of those problems in the simplest ways, the ways that would have been available to someone like Lucius Malfoy. He could not order Draco to stay behind and out of danger, because that was a violation of his free will. Nor could he simply seek out and kill those who threatened Draco.

He regretted not killing Rosier on sight.

He did not think that he had it within himself to kill people on sight.

When he tried to think about it, even given the rage in the cat's eyes and the rage that had turned the room around him golden instead of deep purple and green, all his vates instincts revolted, screaming. His love of freedom was the only emotion as deep within him as his love of Draco, and it was able to combat it. He could not simply kill someone he thought was a threat, only to find out later that that person had been an innocent, or someone coming to offer terms of surrender. He could live with the consequences that might follow leaving someone alive to talk, but not the other. If he slew someone by mistake, then the shadows of suicide would come back, and he would look into the abyss he had when he let Loki kill Kieran.

But neither could he live if Draco were destroyed.

That was what he had understood in the moments after they arrived back at Hogwarts, not the moments when he tried to think of something to do to get Draco free of the Lung Domination Curse or the moments when he sprawled at Rosier's feet. As undeniable as the will to allow people their will was the one that said his mind, his heart, his soul, were wrapped up in Draco. If Draco died, he would follow. And if he allowed something to happen to Draco, again, suicide out of guilt would be the road he had to choose, the one his sense of right would make him choose.

And yet he couldn't do that either, since the wizarding world needed him alive to fight Voldemort and achieve as much as he could of the tasks of a vates.

For a moment, just a moment, Harry closed his eyes and mourned in silence that he had not been born Connor instead—the twin who

turned out to be destined for perhaps one task and that far in the future, after he had learned a few lessons in love and compassion. He didn't want his magic, he didn't want whatever thing in him made other people follow him into danger, he didn't want his past, not if it made him have to face choices like this.

But the moment passed, and Harry opened his eyes again and scowled at the far wall.

So he could not take the simple methods. So wishing that things were different did not mean they would suddenly change into those different configurations. So his definition of what was most important in life and what he should do with his magic would not agree—probably never agree—with anyone else's.

That didn't matter. The choices and the consequences of his choices were still there, and needed to be lived with.

And that was what made him different, Harry thought, as he eased backward and pulled Draco with him so that his head rested on his chest. The cat had lain down beside him and was licking its claws. Now and then Harry felt a swipe of its tail or its flank, feeling solid and smelling musky. Real. His magic was strong enough to bring a creature like this fully formed into life.

He must live with them. Very well. Then he would. He was life-focused, not death-focused, despite the thoughts of suicide that seemed to be wheeling more and more often around his head this year. If he lost people to the Horcruxes, then he would have to live on. He could not think of death as an end, because he had given his life to larger things, responsibilities that would still need him no matter how much he wanted to die.

And I don't think that I would have been happy any other way, not with my training. Harry had to acknowledge that. He did not know how to relax, how to drug his mind and send it into submission. The closest he came to it was during flight, and that was more often an occasion to think about things he couldn't manage on the ground. And even in sex with Draco, he was chasing Draco's pleasure and his

own as fiercely as he could, and then, almost the moment their bedding ended, his mind pounded and raced down a new track again.

He would be destroyed if Draco was, and he could not afford to be.

That was one truth.

He would not abandon his principles against vengeance and binding the wills of others, and that was another. Besides, Draco had proven himself in battle several times now.

So the best answer that Harry could come up with was a bodyguard. He would ask Draco his opinion of the choice, but he would not accept any attempt Draco made to persuade him out of doing it, any more than Draco had let him escape without bodyguards after the Ravensclaws cursed him last year.

Besides—

Harry smiled, and the black cat looked up from licking its claws and nudged its head forward, sliding it along his side, making him tangle his fingers of the silver hand in its fur and stroke it.

He knew how to spin the idea of a bodyguard so that Draco would see it as a privilege of uniqueness, rather than the intrusion that it had tended to represent to Harry. Harry knew all about the vain side of his lover. Most of the time, he could ignore it, or he only used it to tease Draco. This time, it would be useful.

He stroked Draco's hair and looked down at him with a faint shake of his head.

"I'll charm you," he whispered. "Persuade you. Manipulate you. You're a Slytherin, and you'll understand, if you figure it out, that it was merely a case of my following the traits of our House."

The cat licked his flesh palm with a rough tongue, rasping over the wound Rosier had made. Harry glanced at it in surprise, then shrugged. He supposed he should bind it, but it had stopped bleeding

and it didn't hurt. He would take himself to Madam Pomfrey if it became infected.

He lay back and closed his eyes. He should sleep while he could. The moment he was awake, he had questions to ask Snape and others of his allies—specifically, those who bore the Dark Mark on their arms.

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“No.”

“Severus.” Harry was calm. Snape knew that from the way he hadn't retreated into formality the moment Snape refused. “I do want to do this. I know that you're a talented Legilimens and can sense most intrusions into your thoughts, but if I'm right, then Voldemort's using a spell that compels thought, and he's a very strong compeller. I just want to look for traces of the golden bridle that I saw in Rosier's thoughts. That's all.”

Snape bared his teeth. “Nothing has happened to me,” he said, looking Harry in the eye. “Since I ended the Sanctuary dreams with the one that told of Regulus's death—”

Harry stepped forward, but Snape's withering glare stopped him.

“I spoke of it with Joseph,” said Snape. “And that is over now. I have thought about it, and soothed the stirred memories back to sleep, or else made an effort to integrate them into my life and coexist with them.” That he had not told Joseph everything about his last dream, including what would have made him look most weak, was not the point. “There have been no vivid or compelling dreams since then. Rosier's line about lost sleep likely means nothing.”

“But Indigena taunted him about bad dreams when he kidnapped Connor,” said Harry, “and he went mad. I think he knew he was being controlled, then, or figured it out. I don't think they were working together at all. Indigena, or Voldemort working through Indigena, made him send those letters to Connor, and those carved wooden figures, and compelled him to wait until they were ready to summon

Connor to Hawthorn's garden. Otherwise, do you think Rosier would have remained focused on one goal for that long? I had the feeling that it was impossible for him. He is simply too chaotic, and he would have wanted to do something more to get to me than to merely summon my brother to an ally's house and cast a few curses at him."

Snape had to admit that the scenario sounded unlikely to him, too. But he could still not believe that the Dark Lord was trying to control him by means of bad dreams or a golden bridle spell. He would have sensed such a thing. He was a Legilimens second only to Voldemort in Britain now that Dumbledore was dead, and an Occlumens second to none. If there was influence in his mind through dreams, then Voldemort could not have hidden it from him.

And he did not want to allow Harry to read his mind.

"Severus. Please."

Snape tossed his head and turned away. "I do not wish to," he told his fire flatly. "There are things in my memories that you do not need to see, Harry." He had been dreaming about the Marauders lately, and remembering the way that Dumbledore had allowed them to stay in the school when he should have expelled them after the attack on Snape. And he had allowed a werewolf to attend in the first place, madman that he was. Snape clenched his hands. Now and then he woke so full of hatred that he had to lie still and breathe deeply for a long moment before he could stand and make ready to teach Potions. Joseph said it was a healthy sign, a healing sign, that he could remember that much hatred without either burying it in an Occlumency pool or taking it out on his students, but Snape knew it made him shake with remembered darkness.

Harry did not deserve to see that wave of loathing directed at his father—the man who had sired him, say rather—at the moment when Snape was trying to be the best father to him that he could be.

"Please, Severus," Harry tried this time, as if the combination of the word and the name in that order would work a miracle where so far they had not.

Feeling as though his first name were tugging on him like the bridle Harry wanted to look for, Snape turned around again. "Why don't you ask the others first?" he asked harshly. "Why don't you ask Peter?"

"I already did," said Harry. "Asked, and looked into his mind. No trace of a golden bridle. And he said his dreams were no worse than usual. They're finally calming down now, after keeping him awake for a relatively long time. Hawthorn and Adalrico and—" He paused a moment, as though reluctant to say the name, then finished. "Lucius said they haven't dreamed of violent memories or anything else recently. And Regulus's mind isn't his own since he came back from Death, but she fills it with visions that have nothing to do with Voldemort."

"Then why would you think that I could have dreams that do?" Snape whispered, closing his eyes. "Am I alone, and none of the others, to be compared with Rosier?"

Harry touched his arm. Snape opened his eyes to see Harry taking a deep breath as though to prepare himself for climbing a mountain.

"I think he would target you before any of the others," Harry whispered, "because he was working that golden bridle on a man strong and difficult to control. Rosier is only harder to control than you are because he's mad." He paused, throat working. "And he would target you because he knows that you mean the most to me out of anyone who wears a Dark Mark."

Slowly, Snape knelt, holding Harry's eyes all the while. Harry looked nervous and miserable, the way he usually did when saying that one person was more important to him than another, but he didn't glance away.

Snape dropped his barriers. Harry was through into his mind, in a little rush of Legilimency that he greeted with a gasp. Then he caught himself, and began to swim with more grace than Snape had expected, heading towards the center of his mind, sifting memories with gentle fingers and looking for Merlin knew what sign of the Dark Lord's tampering.

It was—uncomfortable to have someone else in his mind. It always had been, Snape thought, which was one reason he was glad that he had learned most of what he knew of Occlumency and Legilimency out of books, rather than in combination with a teacher. His mind had been his secret refuge during his school days when others taunted him, and even sometimes from his mother's words. He could abandon Eileen's lessons and retreat into a corner where he was the Half-Blood Prince, son of pureblood royalty even if unacknowledged, and someday everyone would admire him for his brilliance with spells and potions.

Sometimes he caught a little jerk or flinch from Harry, but luckily, he did not have to confront any particular memory when that happened. Harry's touch was light, flitting from one part of his mind to the next. Snape suspected that came from his respect for someone else's free will. Harry would never be the best Legilimens in the world, simply because he had none of the liking for domination that had made Voldemort so proficient in the art.

Then he was out, and Harry stood gazing up at him solemnly. Snape waited, not knowing what he had seen.

"No trace of a golden bridle," said Harry. "And I saw no dreams that he'd sent in your memories." He reached out and put a hesitant hand on Snape's arm again. "Thank you. I know that must have been hard for you. And you're one of the bravest men I've ever met, Severus."

Snape stared. It hadn't occurred to him that part of the solemn shine in those green eyes came from admiration. But it did, and he could only stand there as Harry gave him a quick hug and then slipped quietly to the door. He did pause there, looking back with a faint smile that warned Snape he was about to say something to lighten the mood.

"Are you sure the Sorting Hat never considered you for Gryffindor, Severus, with all that bravery?"

Snape looked for something to throw, but Harry was already out the door.

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"I don't understand why we're here," complained Melinda Honeywhistle, tapping her quill against her scroll.

Harry ignored her serenely, along with the other reporters who shuffled their feet and muttered agreement. They stood in the center of the Hogsmeade road, in a roped-off section that still left foot travelers room to get by. Beyond the reporters, whom he'd invited, Harry had attracted a good deal of curious attention from the villagers. That suited his purposes. He currently hovered off the muddy ground in the center of the ropes, not on a platform, but borne along on currents of pure magic. That suited his purpose, too, which was to impress people to death.

"You will in a moment," said Harry, and turned his eyes upwards, since he'd seen a moving shadow. Alas, it was only one of the thestrals, rising idly from the Forbidden Forest and turning on a thermal. Harry watched him, and stifled the impulse to rise and join him. He could, yes, but only a small portion of the crowd would be able to see the creature he flew in company with, and those who could would be terrified. "If he comes, of course."

"You invited us here for someone who might not even appear?" Honeywhistle's face was ugly when Harry glanced at her again. "You should have a good excuse for this, Potter."

"That's not my name anymore," said Harry, with enough force that she started and took a wary step back from him. Harry raised an eyebrow, and pretended to let his anger drain away. He hadn't been angry at all, had suffered only a tiny spark of irritation, but they didn't need to know that. Sometimes using Slytherin manipulation was the best thing to do after all. With the control he could have over his emotions if he wanted to exercise it, Harry had managed to persuade Draco to accept Syrinx as a bodyguard, to persuade Peter that his form really was a lynx and he was ready to move on to more complicated Animagus training, and to interest these reporters to attend this showing, all in the last week. "At least I have that much in common with the one I asked to appear here this morning. He did

have a name, once, but I only call him by it out of his courtesy. I would suggest that none of you try using it.”

He saw an older wizard’s lips shape the question, but he wasn’t about to give the name away.

Besides, in that moment Dobby arrived.

He coalesced out of the air, his shape coming together from a myriad white sparks that until that moment seemed to have lain dormant in the mud. They rose and spun around each other, then joined into a shape that Harry had to swallow a chuckle at. Dobby had chosen the body of a black unicorn, though the horn itself was white, and the tail was a mix of red and white and green, and his eyes were green and blazing, and—

Harry narrowed his own eyes a bit. The unicorn had a white scar shaped like a lightning bolt extending from the base of his horn to the top of his eyes.

I’m sure he only means to make a point.

Dobby blinked at the reporters who surrounded him. Those eyes weren’t just green, Harry saw when he glanced into them. They had the same golden sparks, the same immense wisdom, that he had seen when Dobby took him to the bedside of Jiv and her son.

And the magic. It poured into the world a few moments behind Dobby, soaking the people who watched, turning the air damp and moist with a half-felt rain. Dobby reared and brought down a single hoof that flashed from black to white as it moved, striking the ground.

The mud and the cobbles of Hogsmeade tore, and a spring of water fountained up, singing quietly to itself as it flowed along the street. Some people stepped away from it with a cry, but others came forward, looking half-dazed from the amount of magic in the air, and bent to drink. Harry smiled. His own senses were alive and awake, and he didn’t have to ask to know that the water was cold and clear in their mouths, quite the best thing they had ever tasted.

“This is what can happen,” Dobby said, his voice so sweet that it was like that water being poured over his ears. Harry shuddered, gooseflesh lifting on his arms, trails of pure delight pricking around the center of his back. “I was once a house elf, and then Harry freed me. Now I have gone back to what my kind was meant to be. Shapeshifters of the moment, changing as we move, changing to reflect what we learn of the world, which is everything.” He turned his head, and let the horn glint, cleaving the air until the edge of it seemed like a needle. “Long ago, we entered the house elf form, giving up some of our greater power in order to learn about the limits, and it was thus that wizards found and tied us with the webs. And we forgot what we were. Now, because we have begun to be free, we have begun to remember.”

He turned and laid his horn on Harry’s shoulder. Harry forgot how to breathe. Despite the scar and his odd-colored tail, Dobby had faultlessly imitated the other aspects of a unicorn, including the graceful curve of its neck, like nothing else in the world, and the warm, soft animal smell of its fur.

“Thank you, vates,” Dobby said, so softly that Harry had no doubt it was meant to remain private.

Harry couldn’t speak. He nodded. Dobby flung himself back abruptly, rearing in midair, his hooves dancing above the cobbles and mud as though he were afraid of rousing a spring everywhere he went, and arched against the sky.

“When you free us,” he said, his voice soaring to follow his motion, “you free one of the primal magical forces of the world. When you free us, then see what beauty falls!”

His legs bent, his hooves following the path of them like shooting stars, and when he reached the end of his kneeling motion, he exploded.

The sparks that flew everywhere from him were like black snowflakes. One brushed against Harry, burrowed blindly along his sleeve for a moment, and then reached bare skin and latched on.

Harry saw.

For a moment, he caught a glimpse of the path the shapeshifters walked on. It was nothing like the paths of Dark and Light, not a defined road so much as what Dobby's people—and almost he felt their name, teasing at his teeth and tongue, there and then flown—had chosen to do with their existence at the beginning. Long-lived, immortal if they wished to be so, existing in the midst of immense magic, able to change shape, they altered, and altered, and altered again, flowing through all the other powers in the wizarding world and the Muggle one.

Why had they been created? They did not know, and that did not matter. They did not think they had been bred for a defined purpose like the flying horses had been, but even if they were, they no longer remembered it. What mattered was that they were there, they existed, and they had a coherence and an identity of their own that did not depend on anything anyone else said.

And then they were bound.

That trapped them in one shape. More, it trapped them in one relationship to wizards. They were no longer free to approach individual wizards if they wished and initiate bonds of friendship or love or enmity with them. They, who had been the freest of the magical creatures, were trapped in servitude, and convinced it had been their idea and was their nature, and that was all they knew.

And now a vates had come, and his breaking of the webs could restore to them choice, the freedom of stars and skies and an endless, uncircumscribed life and body. They were again what they had been, partnering wizards in the great dance if they wished, but not compelled to do so. There were no words for what that meant, and no words for how keenly interested Dobby was, among all his other interests, in making sure that the rest of his kind achieved it again.

Wizards could make up for what they had done only by letting the race they called house elves free. And that was all.

The moment ended. Harry gasped, and saw Dobby, in unicorn form again, spring forward, hooves drumming like bells on empty air. Straight up he ascended, a flying shape, ridiculously-colored tail streaming behind him, and in the sky he burst again and was lost.

Harry slowly surveyed the crowd. Many there were crying openly, and one or two of the reporters had fainted in shock. Melinda Honeywhistle was still on her feet, but she swayed back and forth, her lips blue. Harry nodded, and awkwardly cleared his throat. He had intended for them to meet Dobby and see what could be gained when the house elves were free of their webs, but Dobby had made a far more convincing argument than he could ever have done.

And that was right, Harry thought, the satisfaction slotting into something deep within him. Ultimately, what he wanted was not to make the magical creatures dependent on him, or dependent on the good will of wizards, but able to speak in their own voices, make their own arguments, and live their own lives.

When one could do that, the beauty that fell out of it was greater, by far, than the beauty wizards might achieve when they still had house elf slaves and bound the other creatures as servants.

“Thank you for coming,” he said into the silence and tears. “You can always ask me if you have questions.”

He turned and floated back towards Hogsmeade, mind shaking and stamping its hooves like a unicorn. He had promised himself, in the wake of Rosier’s attack, to live life as best he could, and take precautions to insure that the people around him could survive, without becoming paranoid about it in a way that would steal all the joy out of surviving.

Based on what he had seen from Dobby—the creature who had been, at one point, called Dobby—he still had a lot to learn.

Chapter Seventy-Three: Oaths and Ties

Unlike the last time it had happened, Harry wasn't snatched out of a sound sleep. He was sitting in the middle of the Slytherin common room, attempting to find the best way to phrase a Potions essay. Draco leaned against his shoulder. Now and then he shifted so that his head pushed into Harry's robe, and muttered sleepily. Harry watched him with a faint smile. He wasn't more than half trying to do his homework. The fire and Harry occupied him far more. Syrinx sat on the next chair, her attention on the motions of her wand. Harry knew she was practicing war witch spells, without actually putting enough force behind the incantations to make the spells happen.

The door to the common room flung open, and Harry moved. He didn't realize it until a moment later, when he found himself facing a blinking Owen, but he had dropped his essay, turned so that Draco lay on the couch instead of on his shoulder, and then whirled so that he was in front of both Draco and Syrinx.

Owen blinked one final time and held up his hand. "I'm not a threat, Harry," he said, voice threaded with anxiety.

Harry dropped his head, and managed to exhale. "I know that." He could see Michael peeking in through the door of the Slytherin common room now, though he dropped back immediately when he caught sight of Harry, and knew what this meant. "Your little sibling is being born?"

"Yes," Owen said. "Come with us, since you promised to stand as the child's godfather, and give her a name." He hovered, looking at Harry expectantly.

"Her?" Harry was already tapping his wrist to speak with Snape and Peter, though, and tell them where he was going, so for a moment he couldn't look back at Owen for the answer. When he did, he surprised a small smile teasing the corners of his mouth.

"Yes," said Owen simply. "My mother suspected it was a girl, but she discovered it for certain a week ago. The magical signature from her womb was simply too much like a witch's, she said." For a moment, a

shadow brushed his face with its wings, but then he shook his head. "Father would have liked to have a daughter," he murmured. "As it was, I shall like having a little sister."

Harry wondered how much of Owen's behavior came from a driving, consuming need to be like Charles. He started to move forward, but a hand caught his shoulder. Draco stood behind him.

"I want to come with you," he said.

Owen caught Harry's eye. "That is not a good idea," he said, "for a variety of reasons."

He didn't need to enumerate them all. Harry understood. Michael, of course, must attend the birth of his younger sibling, but if Draco came with them, then the atmosphere would be tense and uncomfortable. That was the last thing Medusa Rosier-Henlin needed right now. Not to mention that the addition of Draco would require the addition of Syrinx, and that would further enlarge the circle of whom the family shared this birth with, beyond what they wanted.

Harry took a deep breath and faced Draco. "I'm sorry, Draco," he said. "I'm going to ask you to stay here."

"You can't force me to," said Draco, as if he had latched on to the notion of free will and nothing else. Well, perhaps he does think that I'll always let him come with me if he just says that he wants to often enough, Harry thought. There's little else that I've denied him, or wanted to.

"I can't," said Harry. "But you can't Apparate yet, and Owen and Michael and I can. That's enough to make you stay here." He caught Owen's eye, and Owen nodded and turned to lead the way out of the Slytherin common room. Michael had waited in the hallway, luckily. Harry supposed that he might have a modicum of sense, though he hadn't often shown it where Draco was concerned.

Draco grabbed onto his arm and held firm. Harry could see his face flushing as he realized how much they were the target of curious gazes, but even that didn't make him loosen his hold. "I want to go

with you,” he said, and, when Harry hesitated, evidently thinking that Harry was going to give in, rather than try to find a way to shake him off without hurting him, he lowered his voice. “Please, Harry? Since the attack by Rosier, I simply don’t feel safe.”

Harry shook himself in irritation, warming the skin under Draco's hands with his magic until Draco let go with a gasp. "Not this time," said Harry shortly. "And you're safer behind the school's wards than you are with me, Draco."

There was a new light in the gaze with which Draco regarded him, meanwhile blowing on his fingers as if they were singed. Harry didn't like it, and suspected they would have an argument later. But he turned and went back to the couch they'd been sitting on without a word. Tragically, he buried himself in his homework again. Syrinx, on her feet and with her wand half-drawn, sat down. Her bright eyes were fixed on Harry's face. Harry couldn't tell what she was thinking.

Owen's hand caught his wrist. "Come on."

Harry nodded, and turned away. He knew how to balance one set of obligations with another set of obligations, and sometimes, he simply couldn't give in to what his boyfriend wanted.

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Owen Side-Along Apparated Harry through the Rosier-Henlin wards, and let him go as soon as it was polite to do so. To his eyes, accustomed to seeing magic in the way his family had done for generations, Harry simply shone too brightly for comfort. He had summoned magic to drive Draco back, and hadn't let it go. Lightning bolts played about him, glowing and sizzling and striking the floorboards.

“Where is Medusa?” Harry asked quietly, stepping away from Owen and looking around the kitchen. It seemed smaller and darker now that his mother and his brother no longer played here as they had used to, Owen thought, looking around himself. Then he deliberately shoved the thought away. His mother still lived. His brother still lived, and had stepped past some of his infatuation with Draco, if his latest

words were to be believed. He had no reason to think that more tragedy would befall his family.

“This way,” he said, and guided Harry down the short corridor that led to his mother’s bedroom.

She labored on her bed with her blanket over her legs, her breathing sharp and short but otherwise controlled. His mother would not indulge in the indignity of screaming, Owen thought. He came to her side and put his hand on her forehead. Medusa opened her eyes, saw him, and smiled faintly.

“Harry—has come?” she asked, timing the words around contractions. Owen watched her belly ripple under the blanket for a moment, and did not look away, much as he would have liked to. He knew Medusa had midwife spells that would help her ease the pain, keep the sheets clean and away from her skin, and clean up the blood and afterbirth. But the thought of what was happening to her body made him uneasy nonetheless.

“He has,” he said, and Harry stepped up beside him and made a short bow to Medusa. Medusa nodded back, and then dropped her head back with a loud grunt as a pushing pain made itself known.

“What would you like me to do?” Harry asked quietly.

“Catch the baby when she comes,” said Owen, and pointed to his mother’s legs.

Harry blinked. “But surely a mother should be the first one to touch her child?” he asked.

“No,” said Owen, wondering where he’d got that odd idea. “In the older days when house elves helped with most births, their hands were usually the ones that touched the pureblood children first.” He gestured to his mother’s jerking hips. “Who touches her first isn’t what makes the difference. It’s whose magic she feels first. House elf magic is neutral as far as children are concerned; they only react to human magic. In some cases, yes, it’s important for their mother to be the one to touch them, but you’re the one who will teach her to live

in the world without fearing power, Harry. It's only right that she should feel your magic sweeping across her skin first."

Harry nodded as if he understood, but his face had gone pale and his eyes glossy for a moment. Owen wondered if he was reliving bad memories. If so, he was past them in a moment and kneeling at the end of the bed. "Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked Medusa. His power unfurled around him. This time, probably because he wasn't angry, there was only a low, shimmery glare that Owen felt well-prepared to deal with.

He heard the door open, and glanced up to see Michael entering. He nodded to his twin, then looked back as their mother spoke.

"Yes. Talk to me."

"What about?" Harry asked, as if the request hadn't disconcerted him. Come to that, Owen thought, he wasn't sure it had.

"The world as it will be when you have finished your vates duties." Medusa had to kick out the words around the babe kicking and struggling at her, but she managed. "The future you plan to build. Tell me about that."

Harry nodded. He was rubbing circles on Medusa's belly now. Owen didn't think it was his imagination that her contractions had grown less violent. "Very well. I plan for creatures to spend a lot of time talking to one another." A faint smile. "I'm sure that you've heard about the freed house elf who showed all those reporters what his people used to be like?"

"Can't—open—the—Prophet—without—it," said Medusa. Owen stepped forward and picked up the vial sitting ready on the bedside table, holding it so that his mother could see it. She nodded, her hair so stuck with sweat to her forehead that it didn't even move as she did so. Owen laid his wand against his right arm, holding the vial carefully in his left hand.

"Diffindo," he whispered.

As his blood poured from the cut into the vial, Harry went on talking, voice low and patient. "Giving back their voices to everyone, or hearing the voices that have been silent, will mean talking. And arguing. And debate. I fully expect some of the swift processes to slow to a crawl, because now we have to think about what we're doing to trees and centaurs and house elves as we move along. We might not be able to talk to some of the magical creatures; that was one reason we thought most of them unintelligent for so long. But some, like phoenixes, who will talk to us, can talk to them." Harry hummed, and a strand of blue fire uncoiled from his throat and flickered along his hair. Medusa's eyes followed it in wonder. Owen knew she had heard the phoenix song from a distance on the morning Harry ended the rebellion, but she had not seen the fire so close before. "There's no reason for us to put up barriers any more, for us to say that we can't help others because we can't understand them. We can. What we've been putting off doing is using that understanding. We want things fast. We don't like the idea of limits. We think everything should be ours just because we're wizards, or humans, or purebloods. But it's not true."

"That—will—be—" Medusa had to break off, her mouth opening in what looked like a wide yawn, and Owen knew it was the closest his mother had come to a scream. The vial was full now, and he corked it, while performing a spell that healed the cut on his arm. "Hard," she finally finished, with a grunt and a gasp, blowing the pain out in a voice only slightly higher than normal.

"It will be," said Harry. His hand continued to rub soothing circles. His silver hand rested on the bed, bracing him, and he never took his eyes off Medusa, though sometimes, Owen noted, he watched the blanket bobbing up and down, and sometimes he watched their mother's face. "I think most humans are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as the center of the universe, so even Muggleborns can't escape that trap. But it doesn't really matter. Things will change. We'll become part of the magical world, not the center. We'll realize that other creatures have a perfect right to ignore us, and to interact in ways that don't include us."

"And—other—Lords?"

"I'll deal with them," said Harry. "Bargain with them until the end of time, if I have to. Or fight them, though that I really don't favor, and won't unless it's a case of giving up my vates duties or my protection of Great Britain if I don't." His hand was rubbing in time to his words, Owen finally realized, spreading a soothing shell of protection around the babe. "I'm committed to this. I fully expect to die before it's achieved. If something like it can be made before I die, then it will be made with my help, not against my will."

Medusa let out a single high, thin screech, which Owen could pretend was like the battle cry of a harpy if he let himself. "The babe comes," she said. "You must be in place to catch her, Harry."

Harry adroitly flipped the blanket back and bent close. Owen shuddered. Better him than me. Yes, birthing rituals were sacred, but most of the time the father and a midwife were there to help it along. Owen did not want to see his mother's vagina close.

A moment later, Medusa let out an enormous whuff of breath, and Owen felt some of the magic she'd enchanted the bed and blankets with spring into motion, as they began to ease her daughter's passage into the world, clean up the afterbirth that followed, and clot the blood.

Then he heard a thin, pinched cry.

Harry sat back up slowly, face slightly dazed. In his arms wriggled and cried a bloody babe, smaller than his forearm, head twisting back and forth until Owen almost feared that she would snap her neck.

And Harry's magic swirled and flared around her, light that blazed and danced like magnesium on her skin. For a moment, she stopped crying and stared up at him, eyes wide in astonishment.

Owen seized the moment to perform the duties he had to as family head, and stepped forward. Harry held his little sister up, and Owen gently dripped the blood from the vial onto her forehead, down along her chest, and across her arms and legs.

“Cradled safe, protected, within the blood of Rosier-Henlin,” he whispered. “I claim you for our family.” Most often, this ritual was done when the child had her name, but that wouldn’t matter so much as the fact that she had been born safely and then claimed. At one time, this would have been used to insure that a potential bastard child took after the father, and a stronger version was used to bind a magical heir to the family.

They had need of neither of those uses—Owen was as capable of imagining his mother in battle as he was of imagining her unfaithful to his father—and so the ancient magic took hold, setting all the blood on the little girl’s body, both her mother’s and her own, afire. Harry gasped, but Owen put a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s all right,” he said, in that tone that had soothed his brother when Michael was being his most difficult. “See? The flames don’t scorch her.”

And they didn’t. They danced, pure dark green to inform anyone who liked that the Rosier-Henlin family claimed Dark pureblood allegiance, over her torso and head, and parted, swaying bright veils, over her face. In a moment, they were gone, and the blood burned away.

Harry reached out as if in a daze, and a basin of warm water sprang into being next to him, conjured from pure magic. Owen blinked, then cursed to himself. He knew there had been something he’d forgotten.

Harry cleaned the girl without taking his eyes from her. Owen couldn’t tell what he thought, of the wrinkled face, or the red, small body, or the high, piercing screams. But his magic was what—Little Sister, he would call her Little Sister for now—felt, and that would serve her well later in life.

Owen did make sure to have a warm cloth that Harry could wrap her up in. By the time he did, she had stopped crying, as she got used to the feeling of powerful magic and was no longer cold. Her eyelids drooped, and her head bobbed on her neck. Harry supported her head, carefully, and then held her out to Medusa.

His mother looked longingly at her daughter, but shook her head. "Not until you have named her, Harry."

“But won’t she be hungry soon?” Harry’s eyes were huge, standing out behind his glasses. Owen bit his lip at the hysterical urge to laugh. He only felt he knew what to do because he was playing the role of family head even more than the role of much bigger brother. Harry looked half-terrified, as if Little Sister were about to be kidnapped by werewolves.

“She will,” Medusa acknowledged, and Owen saw her smile through her exhaustion and pain as the midwife spells urged her legs shut. “So you had best name her swiftly.”

Harry gave a quick little jerk of his head. "And you—the Rosier-Henlin naming traditions—"

“We give Little Sister entirely into your hands,” Owen interrupted him, with a bow. “Name her what you feel is most appropriate, Harry. Don’t worry about what names female ancestors of ours have had.”

Harry swallowed, and nodded, and then stood staring at the baby in his arms for a long moment. Owen waited. He felt a fragile silence in the room even more powerful than that which had begun with the birth, and he could hear the deep steady breaths from his twin, waiting by the door.

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Harry knew what he would like to name the little girl. He just wasn't sure that it would fit in well with the rest of the names in the Rosier-Henlin tradition. He toyed with the idea of naming her Charlotte, after her father, but for all he knew that might cause Medusa pain every time she looked at her—and the one thing he was certain of was that no one in the family would change her name once he'd given it.

Terror wheeled around him in a blaze darker than any of his creative magic as he stared into the tiny, sleepy, scowling face a few inches from his. Such responsibility. I've never had this much responsibility for defining a single life before.

He let himself look once more at the trust in Owen's eyes, and Medusa's. He couldn't see Michael's face from across the room, and he had the feeling that it was probably just as well.

He gave himself permission to use the name he would like, and breathed across her forehead first, whispering the name into her ear, so that she would be the first one to hear it, and always carry a small piece of private knowledge in her heart. That was one of the pureblood birthing rituals he'd studied, and always enjoyed and valued. She stirred, but didn't wake.

Harry looked up and said quietly, "Her name is Eos Rosier-Henlin. For the goddess of the dawn, because of the dawn she will live in." This time, he pressed his lips to her forehead in a kiss, which made her squirm and struggle back to wakefulness. The ritual had to include an original blessing, preferably one that connected with the meaning of the name. "Welcome to the world, little one. May you never forget the meaning of time as the original Eos did, and likewise may you never be a slave to it."

Eos began to cry then, but Harry had heard Owen's exhale of breath. He looked into Medusa's face as he handed Eos to her, and saw only contentment.

"That will do very well, Harry." Medusa drew forth her breast and gently arranged her child in position. Harry wasn't sure why that made him blush and turn away, when he'd been between her legs. But he'd been too involved in the blood and making sure that he was the one to touch Eos to really care, then. "A new name, in both my family and Charles's, but my name is Greek, and hers is, as well. A sign of good luck." She kissed Eos's forehead in turn.

Harry sighed, nearly falling over then and there with relief that he'd not done something wrong, and looked at Owen, unsure if there was anything else he needed to do. But Owen was engaged in smiling a smile very like his father's, and reaching out to stroke his newborn sister's head with delicate fingertips. Harry knew the ritual was done. He would wait until they went back to Hogwarts, since he could tear the wards on the home to escape, but he would prefer not to.

He leaned against the wall, and became aware of someone leaning next to him. Harry turned his head, and started in surprise. He hadn't even realized Michael was still there, and he hadn't expected him to approach him if he was. But instead, Michael was leaning forward and staring at him.

"That's really important to you, isn't it?" Michael asked.

"What is?" Harry asked, unsure which of the many aspects of the ritual or the birth just past Michael could be referring to. "New beginnings?"

Michael gave a jerky nod. He hesitated. Harry waited. He recognized the expression on Michael's face, not because he'd seen him wear it before but because he had seen it on other people. It meant they were thinking. It was a bad idea to push someone like that into speaking before they were ready.

"I've thought," said Michael, so softly his words were like ripples in running water. "I've changed my mind. Could I—could I please become your sworn companion again? I was wrong, and you were right, about the damage I caused last time, and with Draco. But I think I understand what you are now, and what Draco is, and I don't want this gaping chasm between you or him or my brother and me to open up any further." He shut his mouth with a snap, as if he thought he had said too much, and waited.

Harry sighed, and shook his head. He wanted to trust. He wanted to give second chances. But too much had happened between them.

Michael looked lost. He parted his lips, then looked away and shook his head. "I fucked up that much, huh?" he whispered.

"It's not just that," Harry said. "Or not solely that." He didn't know how to phrase it, mostly because he hadn't imagined that Michael would ever want to become his sworn companion again. He trod carefully, phrasing the words in his head long before he let them pass his lips. "It's also Draco. He would throw a fit. He might try to possess you again. And there's the chance that he would give in to the temptation

of trying to flirt with you, simply to rouse my jealousy or to see what would happen.”

“So he would do it because he was bored?” Michael’s eyebrows nearly reached his hairline.

Harry nodded.

“And you love him, and you approve of this.” Michael let out a deep breath. “And you don’t think he’s a weakness in your alliance?”

“I didn’t say that I approve of it,” Harry said quietly, hoping Owen and Medusa couldn’t overhear them. What a conversation to have on the day the newest scion to the Rosier-Henlin family is born. “It’s a fault in him, but I can’t force him to change. I can only keep it from happening again, as much as possible, by attending to circumstances around me more than I did when it originally occurred.” He blinked at Michael, who was still staring. “Do you understand me? I don’t mean to blame you for loving Draco, or for what he did. You tried to protect him even then, and that’s a sign that your feelings ran deeper than he realized. But I won’t chance it happening again.”

“You really don’t want another sworn companion,” Michael said flatly.

“I could use one.” Harry didn’t have to work to maintain his temper. He didn’t think Michael understood his reasons for refusing him. “But it’s not you. It can’t be you. I’m sorry.”

Michael turned away from him, and murmured, “Do you know what it feels like to have your brother refuse to talk to you, because, by his standards, you did something to wrong the rest of the family?”

“Well, yes,” said Harry.

He saw Michael’s shoulders stiffen, but he said no more. Instead, he walked over to the bed and began to greet Eos with soft touches and softer words.

And that was right, Harry thought, rubbing his silver hand across his eyes. He wasn't a stranger in this bedroom. The one who really didn't belong, who was only here by the grace of the family, was Harry.

He waited in silence and patience for Owen to be ready to go back to Hogwarts. He wasn't looking forward to the confrontation that would happen when they arrived. Draco would understand his reasons for attending the birth no more than Michael had understood his reasons for refusing to accept a new oath from him.

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Draco didn't.

"I want to know why you left me behind," he'd said, very directly, and Harry, who had picked up his Potions essay as if he actually wanted to work on it, had replied as directly.

"Because you would have caused tension with Michael, and intruded on the birthing ritual for Eos," he said, sharpening the quill on the heel of his silver hand. Draco had told him that was disturbing. Harry had argued that it was not, as long as the hand still wasn't alive enough to feel what he did to it. "And Syrinx would have had to come, and there was no explicit invitation to include her."

"That's not very fair to her," Draco pointed out.

"It's right," Syrinx said from her chair, in a puzzled voice. "Why would it have to be fair?"

Draco shot her an annoyed glance. It was true that, most of the time, he enjoyed having a bodyguard. Syrinx was silent and efficient, and knew her place, including enough pureblood rituals to correct Draco if he was about to make himself look like a fool. But she reminded him of nothing so much as Harry in the first two years Draco had known him. That wasn't an image he liked, or a memory he wanted to encourage to return.

"Harry," he insisted, focusing on him. "That's not a good enough reason. I wanted to go, and you left me behind." He let a carefully

considered petulant tone into his voice. He was willing to sound like he was whinging if it would get him what he wanted.

"I didn't bind you," Harry said. "I just said that you weren't going. In this case, I considered Owen's will, and Michael's, and Medusa's, more important than yours, Draco. That's all." He bent down and put his quill to parchment.

"You burned me."

"Made you let go of me," Harry corrected absently, at the same time as he corrected a mistake on the parchment. "And it didn't hurt, Draco. I know that you took your hand away before my skin could truly get hot."

"You don't really care, do you?" Draco could hear his voice rising, and was glad that most of the other Slytherins had gone to bed. Those who remained watched him with barely concealed amusement. He found himself unable to mind, though. He could make a scene, and perhaps that would change Harry's absent words to apologies. "I told you I haven't felt safe since Rosier's attack. You wouldn't have cared if you came back and found me gone again, or under the Lung Domination Curse." Of course he didn't believe that, but he wanted to make Harry say he was sorry.

Harry looked up at him.

Draco took a step back, feeling as if he'd been hit with a lead weight. With a quick shake of his head, Harry gathered up his essay, quill, and inkwell, and turned for the common room door.

"Where are you going?" Draco called after him.

"Out of your sight," Harry responded, voice straining on the edge of calm. "You've been acting like a brat all week, Draco. I indulged it. Why shouldn't I? You'd had a bad scare. I almost lost you. And most of what you did was harmless enough, and hurt no one other than me. Now, you're being unreasonable, and you know better. You're not afraid, you're just trying to use my fear of losing you to manipulate me."

“That’s what Slytherins do,” said Draco, hiding behind a weak defense.

“No, Slytherins manipulate subtly,” said Harry, and he walked out of the common room. The door shut behind him with a grating slide.

No one else in the common room would look at him, Draco found when he turned round. He picked up his homework, and, fuming, went to bed. Most of him was just irritated, though, not angry. Harry would return in a few minutes, and apologize, or laugh with him over it, and then tell him the real reason that he hadn’t wanted Draco to come with him tonight. Perhaps it had to do with fearing to daze Michael with Draco’s beauty again.

The minutes became hours, until Draco had to accept that Harry wasn’t returning to their bedroom that night.

And that made him think that perhaps the reasons Harry had given him were the real ones, and the emotion that had made him stagger back when Harry looked at him—disappointment—was real, too.

Draco punched the pillow savagely. He’d thought that he had some kind of absolute control over Harry after Rosier’s attack.

It hurt to realize that he didn’t, and that Harry was still perfectly capable of walking away from him when he thought he was being childish. Even Harry’s tolerance, it seemed, had limits.

Chapter Seventy-Four: The Voices of the Light

“Harry. I wish to speak to you, sir.”

Harry turned in surprise. He knew it was Syrix; there was no one else in the school who addressed him as “sir,” bar the one time Snape had grown a very, very dry sense of humor over a Potions mishap that Harry should have known better than to make. “Syrix,” he said, with a small nod, and snapped his fingers at one of the library chairs to move it over for her. He was once again in the library, following every tale of willing sacrifice he could to its end and trying to see some hope along that track. Syrix had come in so quietly that she hadn’t attracted Madam Pince’s notice, much less his own. “Please, sit.”

She took her seat at once, with a delicate quickness Harry remembered from his own days of training. He swallowed his envy. Syrix only had this absolute certainty of her place in life right now, he reminded himself. When she finished this stage of her war witch training, then she would take back her emotions and the other things that made her more like a human than an automaton. So she did not really lead the simple life he had led five years ago—and even that life had been more complicated than it seemed, crisscrossed by the shadows of betrayals he hadn’t known about at the time.

“What would you like to speak to me about?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder. Sure enough, Draco stood nearby in another aisle of books, poking sullenly at them. Syrix would not have gone far without him.

“I carry a message for my family.”

Harry nodded slowly. If the message was urgent, then Laura Gloryflower would have contacted him herself, by means of the phoenix song spell. This made it much more likely to be a formal situation, requiring a face-to-face meeting and someone of the Gloryflower bloodline to carry out. “And what would she have of me?” he asked, dropping into formal cadences. He heard Draco stop poking among the books and come to stand at his shoulder. Harry didn’t look at him. He did intend to speak with him, to tie up the

trailing loose ends of the argument they'd had over his coming to Eos's birthing ritual, but for the moment Syrinx's calm, pale face took all his attention.

"My cousin serves the Light," said Syrinx, and paused, waiting for a response.

"It is honored in its servants," said Harry. Draco snorted, but luckily didn't say anything Harry would have to pinch him for.

"She watches the reputation of the Light soar up and down in the world," Syrinx continued serenely. "For the past year, she has watched its travails with a wide eye and a blushing cheek. The Light has done monstrous things to secure its own power. Even though she did not follow Albus Dumbledore, he was the Lord of the Light in Britain, the representative of our allegiance. His actions touch every one of us."

Again the pause, and Harry gave the only response he could make, though it wasn't the one he actually believed; the constraints of this dance demanded acknowledgment of the truth of the messenger's words or an addition of praise, nothing more. "The Lord of the Light did indeed abuse his power."

"The monitoring board and the end of the rebellion were believed to be a new era for the Light," Syrinx continued. "And now she sees that they were not. The monitoring board listened too well to that witch, Aurora Whitestag, who wished nothing more than to manipulate you. They danced on the end of her chain as if she were someone who mattered, who could make their lives harder if she did not control them. And she undeclared!" Syrinx paused a moment as though to calm down, though Harry was sure the passion in her voice was all Laura's and not her own. "The Light has relied on your power, passively, so far. It is time for that to change. I am here as a representative of Gloryflower and Opalline both. Paton Opalline and Laura Gloryflower ask if you will join them in a formal family alliance, similar to the one that you currently maintain with both the Parkinson and the Bulstrode families."

Harry took a breath of surprise. He had never suspected that either family would initiate such an alliance; Paton had seemed happy enough with the connection that Fergus's death had established between them, and Laura had fought at his side in her own way, such as by sheltering Delilah from the werewolf hunters. And to put themselves into the company of Dark wizards! More to the point, to know that they were doing so, to draw attention to the parallels themselves...

That, more than anything, told Harry how much Dumbledore's actions had embarrassed Laura.

Syrinx still waited for his answer, he saw when he looked up. She sat with her hands folded and her head tilted back, baring her throat. The meaning of that gesture was not lost on Harry, either.

"I accept," said Harry. "If they wish to tie themselves to me, and if they know what they bind themselves to, an undeclared Lord-level wizard—"

"You misunderstand," said Syrinx, and for the first time, a faint smile graced her lips. "They bind themselves to a vates. And they bind themselves to Harry." Her hand slid over his forehead like a blessing. "My anchor."

Harry frowned and shook his head. "How can I be the one whom your sanity depends on?" he asked, now that it was clear they were out of the confines of the ritual. Syrinx would never have made such a personal comment if they were not. "I haven't done much to encourage you to choose me that way, and—"

Again, he was interrupted. Syrinx was laughing quietly, with a tone of pure joy in her voice Harry had been sure she was incapable of. She touched his earlobe in a gesture that reminded him of the one with which she'd touched her own when she spoke to the golden kitten near Voldemort's warded house.

"You are too used to looking at things from a Dark perspective," she said, "too used to having allies who require endless persuasion and tugging and flattery until they are satisfied. You have little idea what

your exploits look like through Light eyes, sir, and none at all what they look like through mine. I find what you have done enough. More than enough, admirable as the morning air is.” She gave him a light kiss this time, on the forehead above the lightning bolt scar, ignoring Draco’s growl. “If you wish me to tell you the tale of how the past few months have looked from my perspective, I will. But the Light sees differently than the Dark. It can tell when the Dark has a good idea, and it adopts it. But we are not as the wizards you have known.” She smiled at him. “I look forward to helping you know us.”

Harry nodded, a bit dazed. Syrix paused, then added, “If it makes you feel better, it was nothing you did, directly, that caused this. The immediate cause was learning what we had done to house elves in the name of having servants. My cousin’s family and the Opallines intend to free them.”

Harry had to swallow several times before he could speak. The example of such powerful Light families doing this would send currents running through the wizarding world. Some Light families who right now followed the example of bastards like Cupressus Apollonis might start freeing their house elves because the Gloryflowers and the Opallines had. “I cannot thank you enough.”

“You can thank us by letting us become your allies.”

Harry nodded once more, and then Syrix stepped back, turned off her smile, and became part of the bookshelves. Harry faced Draco. He knew that Syrix could listen to every nuance of this conversation and not repeat any part of it to another living soul. And it was something to know that Draco would be safe even as Harry talked to him. A nightmare last night about Rosier stepping through the wall to Portkey Draco away as he had Connor made Harry simultaneously snicker at his own fear and be glad to have Syrix there.

“Draco,” he said softly, and Draco promptly turned his head away. Harry grasped his cheek and turned his face back. “Look at me.”

Draco’s temper had been boiling for most of the week, and Harry was sure that it would spill over as soon as they locked gazes. It took a

few moments longer than that, but then Draco was ranting, though he kept it to a low, heated voice that did not wake Madam Pince's wrath.

"What do you want me to say, Harry? That I'm sorry? I could say that, I suppose. I tried two days ago, and you didn't accept it. Or I could say that I'm sorry I accused you of violating the standards of free will, but you know what I'm like when there's something I want and you deny it to me. You know how I was raised, as the sole heir of a Dark pureblood family. And you know what I can do when I'm pushed. You know what I've given up for you, what I've initiated for you—" He made a flying gesture that Harry assumed was meant to take in their joining ritual. "You know what I am. And then you persist in trying to make me different than I am, expecting some behavior from me other than what I can give. What can I say? I'm a brat."

Harry waited patiently until he wound down, then said, "No, you aren't. Or you don't have to be."

Draco blinked at him, eyes narrowing slightly.

"Sometimes, what you describe is a source of strength," Harry said, and leaned nearer, until Draco seemed fascinated and couldn't glance away from his eyes despite several small, flickering movements in his face. "It drove you through those first two years when I barely acknowledged you as a friend and thought you would get bored of me any moment. And sometimes your stubbornness meant that you were the only one not to leave me in a moment of crisis. The Chamber of Secrets, Draco. I still remember that." He caressed Draco's cheek with a thumb. "I am sensitive to what you've given up for me and what you've initiated for me, yes. But I think the passage of time has fossilized some of your conceptions of yourself."

"I don't know what you mean," Draco breathed, looking as though he didn't know whether to be angry or to give in to the caress.

"I know you don't," said Harry quietly, and kissed him, the first kiss they had shared since their argument. He drew back before Draco's tongue could touch his. "You have strength and weakness mixed, and the weakness is made of attitudes that even you think of as frail, chinks in your armor. But you refuse to abandon them, because you

think admitting them at all would mean another weakness. The furthest you get is this sulky half-defense of them. And if you really could only be a child and a brat and that was all, I would accept that argument.

“But I’ve seen you at your highest and your best, Draco, when you put forth the effort. I know who you really are, the man you try to hide from.” Harry raised his eyebrows, locking Draco in a gaze whose sheer intensity made Draco flush. “The man who defied his father for me, who possessed the Minister, who helped me in the graveyard last Midwinter, who chose the most dangerous method of Declaring to the Dark because it was the only one that answered his own pride. You can be that person, Draco. Not all the time, but you can climb much closer to him than you are now even in your moments of relaxation. And I don’t feel inclined to indulge the childishness that hides him any longer.”

“So you’ll let me know when my behavior is acceptable to you, will you, now?” Draco made his voice as frigid as he could, but it shook on the last words, somewhat destroying the effect.

Harry gripped his shoulders and shook him. “You utter idiot,” he said, putting as much disgust and as much affection in his voice as he could. “I want you to be better for your sake, Draco. Because I’ve seen what you are when you push yourself, and what you are is magnificent. You degrade yourself, not me and not the Malfoy name, when you shove your pride down like this and pretend you were never more than a bratty earthworm. Rise, Draco. I know that you can do it. You have the ambition to do it, when you let yourself know that. You aren’t this child, and I won’t let you pretend that you are, any more than you would let me pretend not to be a Slytherin.”

He shut Draco’s protest with a kiss, fierce and strong, a demanding call for a response, and stood. “I don’t set a date when I’d like you to change your mind on this,” he told Draco. “But I want an equal, Draco, damn it. I’ve seen him a few times. And I would like it very well if you could find him by the vernal equinox.”

Draco frowned. Harry could hear what he was thinking: that that was only a week away. “Why?”

Harry gave him a slow smile. He deliberately reached for slyness and seductiveness, two qualities he had never really tried to add to his expression before. Draco bit off a tiny moan, and then stared at him.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Harry whispered. “And maybe you’ll get to.” He winked once at Draco, then turned around and walked out of the library. He had to acknowledge that he’d done all the Horcrux research he could for today.

Besides, the taste of Draco's mouth and the slightly stunned expression on his face, which was like the look Harry imagined he must have worn when Lucius presented him with his ultimatum about the rebellion, had given Harry a rather urgent problem that needed taking care of.

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He met the Gloryflowers and the Opallines for the swearing of the formal family oaths in Hogsmeade, pertinently enough, since that was also the place where Dobby had shown the reporters the image of house elf freedom and started this. Harry smiled as he watched more and more Opallines appear. Some of the younger children, of course, couldn't really understand the purpose of the ceremony, but they knew they were in a place where they could pack snowball-like shapes out of the mud of the streets and throw them at each other. That was part of the definition of happiness.

“Harry.”

He turned sharply, surprised to hear the joy in that voice—perhaps simply because it was so long since he'd heard it as other than harassed. Calibrid Opalline caught his hands, not seeming to notice that one was gradually warming silver, and drew him nearer for a kiss. Harry gave it to her, and then pulled back and looked at her questioningly.

She appeared smug.

“What?” Harry asked, glancing around. Paton was making his way towards him, talking in Manx to a child he held whose long hair swayed around the face and hid most of his or her features. Angelica Griffinsnest was scolding a girl Harry thought was her granddaughter for throwing mud, and the girl was pretending to look sorry about it. No one else seemed to be suffering Calibrid’s secret source of excitement.

“None of our family is going to have any more house elves.” Calibrid clasped her hands demurely in front of her, but Harry wasn’t fooled. The shine in her eyes made stars look dim. “And more than that, we’re gradually going to reveal ourselves to Muggles, little by little.”

Harry understood her smugness then. This was something Calibrid had wanted for a long, long time.

“Where?” he asked. “Not on the Isle of Man, surely.”

Calibrid shook her head. “No. The British Ministry would simply come in and Obliviate all the Muggles. But one of my cousins has a—special understanding, shall we say, with the Ministry of Portugal?” She laughed quietly. “And it will be small, at first, tricks they can put down to magicians or mad people. But they’ll teach the Muggles the meaning of enchantment again, slowly. The unicorns are already running all around the world and bringing back the magic. I think it’s time that the wizards participated in that revolution, too. Freeing our house elves is just the first step of many. We say that we value magic, that we love it more than the distinctions of blood and allegiance, and that powerful wizards are honored among us. We can at least try to live as if we believe that.”

“But what about the International Statute of Secrecy?” Harry asked, his mind racing. He knew Scrimgeour’s people had struggled mightily to preserve that in the face of Acies’s attack and the sight of a dragon soaring over Muggle London. He couldn’t imagine the rest of the wizarding world would react kindly to it if it were to happen in Portugal, either.

Calibrid said nothing, but looked smugger.

“They’re changing that?” Harry asked in disbelief.

She shook her head. “You misunderstand. We have people who are willing to risk going to prison in all sorts of countries so that we can bring magic into the world again. It’s nothing more than what you risked, when you came back after the end of the rebellion. It’s not as much as werewolves risked in these last few years, living among us and fearing that someone would denounce them at any moment. It’s time that ordinary wizards shared part of the risk, don’t you think?”

Harry licked his lips. “I—“

“And before you can come up with any nonsense,” said Calibrid briskly, “just remember that you may have inspired this, but you’re not at fault for it, and you’re not responsible for the consequences. The glory and the blame are ours, both. You’ve made us more willing to act with freedom, vates. Is that not a grand thing?”

“A dangerous thing,” Harry said, all the stories he had ever heard of Muggle persecution of witches and wizards surging back full force.

“Oh, of course,” said Calibrid. “Change always is. But that’s one reason it’ll happen slowly, with some Muggles being Obliviated, but others remembering. A unicorn here, a hippogriff there, a childhood friend who’s a wizard over there. Piece by piece, Harry, and we fit through the cracks. They can’t catch us all.” The smugness seemed to have carved permanent lines on her face by now. “And given our family, they’ll trace out the patterns of connections for a long time before they realize that chaos tends to follow wherever Opalline bloodlines flourish. And even then, they simply can’t shut us all out. We’re too essential.”

Harry chewed his lips for a moment. “You do realize that the family oath will require me to come to the rescue of anyone in your family who goes to jail?”

“No, it doesn’t,” said Calibrid, voice patient. “Really, Harry, it does not. Not if we break a law, and we know that’s what we’re doing. If we’re used as a hostage by one of your enemies, and you know about the situation in time to save us, then yes. But not when we take risks that

we know are risks. It's the same clause of the oath that doesn't try to kill you if one of our children trips over a rock and smashes her head open—or is eaten alive by a dragon.” Shadows in her eyes then, and no smile around her lips, but that lasted for only a moment before it welled back up. “You can only do so much, and we can only do so much. The ordinary accidents of living in this world, and any extra chances that we decide to take, are not your fault.”

I have to learn, I suppose, in the end, Harry thought, as he looked into her expectant eyes. Dobby and the other magical creatures can make their own arguments. And my allies can fight their own wars. Really, I should be glad that I'm such an inspiration in the first place, and not worry about what they do with that inspiration. It is their own will.

He held out his flesh hand. Calibrid clasped and shook it. Paton was at their sides then, and he smiled at Harry.

“Shall we begin the oath?” he asked.

Harry lifted his head, caught a glimpse of Laura Gloryflower's golden curls moving forward, and nodded. “Certainly.”

“And after the oath,” said Calibrid, her voice quivering with excitement like water dancing on the brim of an over-full cup, “I have something else to tell you, Harry. Or ask you.” She bit her lips and went still, the brown skin of her face darkening further with a blush.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Very well.” Then he drew the knife he'd prepared from his pocket and called the attention of everyone to him with a brief flare of phoenix song. Paton rearranged the child in his arms, and Laura approached quickly. Calibrid was already holding her left arm out.

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Draco flinched as a mud-ball splattered against the Shield Charm he'd hastily raised around himself, then glared in several different directions, moodily. He didn't want to be here. He wanted to be far away, doing other things. But he'd had to come, because today was

the declaring of the formal family alliance, and he was not going to be anywhere other than at Harry's side.

At his shoulder came Syrinx, duplicating his movements gracefully. Draco glared at her. She looked serenely back. There seemed to be nothing he could do that would disconcert her.

Draco bowed his head and kicked a piece of paving stone sticking out of the ground, then scowled because it made his foot hurt.

He felt as though he stood on the edge of an abyss, while below him several people, including Harry, already circled on the wind roaring through the gorge. They called out to him enticingly, told him to come and play, that it was fun. And Draco refused to step off the edge because, well, he couldn't, could he? He was bound to the edge of the cliff by pureblood pride and family duty and all that he knew was true of himself. He wasn't a daring Gryffindor, and he was never going to be some fantastic martyr for the sake of magical creatures like Harry was. Harry could love him for what he was or not love him at all.

But then he looked at people like Connor Potter and Parvati Patil, who had changed out of recognition since third year, and the thought crept sneakily into his mind that who he was could alter.

And what if what Harry said was true, and there was something fiercer, higher, better, in himself that he could achieve all the time? What if Harry was right, that he could grow up, and that growing up meant changing more than he had so far?

It was hard, though. What Draco remembered most about the moments when he had lived life at its highest pitch, at least afterward, was how much effort it took. It left him panting and exhausted. It left him certain that he could do no more, and had to collapse into bed and sleep for a few weeks. And it wasn't so long ago that he'd Declared to the Dark. Or, if he looked back on Rosier's attack as a moment when he had risen above the pain and dashed into the madman's mind to learn the secret of the golden bridle, the last moment like that was just a few days ago. Why did he have to

change now? Why did he have to have another moment like that so soon?

Because Harry thinks you can be better than you are.

Draco knew he looked sulky. He didn't care. He could look sulky in public if he wanted.

His father's voice answered his thought as if summoned, a stern declaration. Malfoys do not show their emotions in public, because their wills trump their desires. What they wish, passionately, is always more important than what they may want in any one, fleeting, childish moment.

And this was a childish moment. Children sulked, Draco knew.

And Harry had said that he knew Draco was a man, somewhere under the façade of sulkiness and petulance. And he had said that he wanted an equal. Draco had thought, at first, that that only meant he didn't want Draco trying to exercise power over him the way he'd tried to the night of the birthing ritual.

Now he had to think that it meant Harry wanted Draco to be able to keep up with him, understand the same kinds of thoughts, do the same kinds of deeds—on a level of matched glory, if not exactly the freeing of house elves—and participate in debates on an equal level even if he didn't agree. He had to know enough so that he could disagree in a manner that didn't involve whinging.

Harry was calling him on to be an adult. Draco wondered if, after all, his mental picture shouldn't involve stepping over a cliff to fall onto the winds of a gorge where other people circled, but should look like climbing a mountain to join Harry, who was bouncing impatiently on one of the upper ledges, waiting for him, convinced that it was only Draco's slowness and not any inherent incapacity that held him back.

He didn't want to think that, because it meant that the accusation Harry had made against him during the Presence of War, that Draco could do anything he wanted but was lazy, was true.

And that meant he had no one but himself to blame.

He came to a stop behind Harry, his head spinning, overflowing with ideas and thoughts he could not stop thinking. It wasn't fair. Even when he didn't actually have conversations like that with Harry, his partner's voice was in his head, the words unfading, whispering at him. He scowled at Harry's back.

The family oaths were done. Calibrid Opalline, the Squib woman whom Draco still couldn't believe Paton had chosen as his heir, was stepping back, her pale hair rustling around her dark face as she handed Harry's knife to him. Then she cleared her throat. Harry looked up at her.

"I did say that I had something I wanted to ask you when the oath was sworn, Harry," she said. "And it is this."

Harry would be raising his eyebrows, Draco knew, though he couldn't see his face from this angle. He simply knew him that well.

Calibrid smiled. "Will you marry me?"

Draco felt as though someone had cast a Freezing Charm on his chest. He stared. Harry, equally caught without words, backed up a step from Calibrid and nearly slammed into Draco.

"No, he bloody well won't!" Draco found his voice at last. "What kind of witch do you think you are, interfering in a sacred joining ritual like this?"

"A sensible one," murmured Calibrid, eyes intense, "taking a wizard who deserves an excellent partner from one unworthy of him."

Draco could not speak. The Freezing Charm seemed to have reached his tongue. He reached out and dug his hand into Harry's shoulder. He knew from the way Harry winced that he was hurting him, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Harry laughed a moment later, tone light. Draco told himself he was the only one who heard the strain in the back of his voice, let alone knew what it meant. “Calibrid, it’s a funny joke, but—”

“It’s not a joke,” said Calibrid, not moving. Her hands were clasped in front of her, and if she was conscious of the eyes staring from either side of her, Draco could not tell. He was reluctantly impressed, and furious with himself for being impressed. “And it’s not the price of our alliance, either. I have offered. You would make me an excellent husband, Harry. I have no reason to doubt your honor or your worth. You aren’t Declared for the Light, but given what you have achieved so far, that doesn’t matter; undeclared, you have done our world far more good than Albus Dumbledore. You would have a family around you who likewise loves and honors you. We would take a two-year ritual, which would conclude on the second anniversary of this day.” She smiled, and Draco couldn’t tell if her eyes were cruel, either, when they came to him. “Spring is the best time to begin a joining.”

“You have no right to do this,” Draco hissed at her.

“Yes, I do.” Calibrid was calm. “Until Halloween of this year, and the seventh ritual that you two pass through, anyone has the right to ask one of the partners for his hand. The partner does not have to agree, though.” She darted a glance at Harry that told Draco she was hoping he would agree, and that, no, this was not a joke. “And while it would be extremely bad manners for a Dark witch to ask you something like this at any point since the first Walpurgis dance, I am a Light witch. The same rule does not cross Declared allegiances.”

“I want to know what you meant,” Draco said. He could feel himself vibrating. His breath had sped up until he was aware that he sounded on the verge of hyperventilating, but he couldn’t seem to slow it down. His face was flushed with heat, and his hands were digging and twisting into each other even though he hadn’t told them to.

“About Harry’s worth?” Calibrid gave him a slow, scornful glance. “If he hasn’t already proven himself to you a hundred times over, I do not know what poor words of mine can convince you.”

“Not that,” said Draco. “About my unworthiness of Harry. Why did you say that?”

Calibrid’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Do you really want me to answer that, Malfoy?” she asked. “In front of these witnesses?”

“No.”

That was Harry’s voice, not his, and then Draco found privacy wards springing up, encircling them. Sound from the outside of the sphere died. He could hear his own rushing breath, and the slight squeak of Harry’s feet as he stepped away from both of them.

Calibrid wasted no time.

“You don’t share any of Harry’s ideals,” she told Draco bluntly. “You fight beside him, but plenty of people do that. Everything I’ve heard of you calls you someone who whinges and lies back instead of trying to get real labor done. You hardly care about anyone but yourself; if you care about Harry, I think it’s only on accident, and when his will happens to coincide with yours. You take advantage of his love for you to be horrible to other people.” She looked evenly at Harry for a moment. “I don’t say all the fault for that lies with you,” she added. “If adults will not discipline children, or even reward them for their bad behavior, of course the child will do it again.”

Harry flushed.

“You have no idea,” said Draco, the roaring of blood in his ears making it difficult to be sure of what he was saying. “You have no idea what we’ve been through together, what I’ve shared with him—”

Calibrid laughed unpleasantly. “No, I don’t,” she said. “Because you don’t show any sign of that in your outer behavior towards him. If you have a deep and intimate bond with him, I’ve never heard anyone say so. They talk about how you undermine him in public, pick at him in private, and act like a spoiled brat to anyone who crosses you. If no one outside your inner circle can see you as daring and splendid, then are you really daring and splendid?”

"I love Draco," Harry said quietly.

"I have no doubt of that," Calibrid assured him. "But he isn't a match for you in love, Harry. He can't be. He just isn't open enough to the world." She turned back to Draco. "I've grown used to reading people, especially since I'll have to be the political leader of a family who avoids war. I know expressions, and I've learned to tell to a nicety how much the people I watch actually care about the others around them, and give them credit for existing and having wills and minds of their own. Harry is one of the most open I've ever seen. You're one of the most closed. How in the world are you going to be good enough for him? You're not just normal. You're selfish. You require much more work than someone normally open to the world would. And so you add to Harry's burdens instead of complementing his strengths."

Draco could not see by now, anger and tears making his sight blur. He opened his mouth, prepared to fling an insult.

"And now you'll try to insult me," said Calibrid, calm as ice at Midwinter. "Of course you will. You don't know any other way. Why would you? It's what a child would do, and you're a child."

Draco snapped his mouth shut, and stared at her. His head echoed with snatches of remembered words, but the most powerful one was they.

The Squib bitch wasn't the only one who thought this way of him. Harry's other allies did, too. They hadn't seen enough of what he really was—what he could be, in moments he shared with Harry—to think him strong.

And that was wrong, and the only way he could ever show them how wrong they were would be to—

To change his public image. To act the way he dreamed of being. To behave like an adult, and not a child.

The way that Harry had asked him to consider doing.

Draco knew he was greater than the Squib bitch thought he was. He was better than any of them, all of them.

He just had to show them that.

He stepped forward and put his hands on Harry's shoulders. "I want to go back to the school now," he said quietly, never taking his eyes from Calibrid's face. She gave him a contemptuous smile. Draco let out his breath and reminded himself that he could not expect her to change her mind about him just because he had confounded her expectations once. "If you're done with the formal family alliances, can we do that?"

"Of course," said Harry, his own brow furrowed, and dropped the privacy wards.

Draco waited while Harry bid farewell to those who had come to talk to him, and then turned back towards the school. As soon as they were out of their sight, on the road to Hogwarts, he saw Harry's shoulders tense.

He thinks I'm going to yell at him, take out my anger at Calibrid on him.

Draco stopped and put one hand beneath Harry's chin, tilting his head up. Harry met his eyes with a resigned stare.

Draco kissed him gently, slowly, with attention to detail. Harry groaned. Draco waited until he heard Harry panting into the kiss, then broke it off and leaned their foreheads together.

Harry was smart enough to recognize a Moment when he saw one. He waited in silence until Draco spoke.

"I am going to show everyone that I am worthy of you," Draco whispered. "I'm going to show them what I really am."

Harry stepped away and stared at him. Draco saw the quick leap of hope in his eyes, and how he almost immediately tried to destroy it.

That made a pulse of sorrow slip through Draco, that Harry would assume anything like what he promised was too good to be true.

“I promise,” he said. “Now it’s something more than just your asking me, or even wanting to do this to prove something to myself. I didn’t know other people regarded me this way.” He felt his mouth trying to twist into a sneer, and prevented it. Insults would not help him get revenge on people who expected insults from him. “I’ll show them that I’m your equal—and your superior, even, if you don’t watch out.”

Harry smiled.

For the first time since the night of their argument, Draco felt warmth sweep through him. The approval in Harry’s eyes healed the disappointment he’d felt then.

“I knew you could be,” Harry murmured. “I can’t even imagine what you’ll be like once you finally start living at that level that you can live at, all the time.”

“I’ll be the one getting marriage proposals,” said Draco, and he heard the acid of jealousy burning behind his voice.

“I wouldn’t have accepted, you know that,” said Harry, in the kind of tone that made it a self-evident truth.

“I know that,” Draco said. “That doesn’t matter, Harry. What matters is the reason she had for proposing to you. Not thinking I’m worthy of you! I’ll show her.”

And he could. Steel had replaced the hot anger, as if he’d grown a new spine.

I’ll become the kind of person I can be, not the kind of person they want me to be. I’ll fulfill my potential so well they’ll be ashamed of themselves for questioning it.

I’ll show them who I really am.

Intermission: Gloom's Own Country

"Severus."

"Severus."

"Severus!"

It seemed that he heard the name everywhere, now that the Dark Lord had instructed him to look for it and think of himself that way. Albus called him by it when he wanted Snape to talk to him about some new strategy in the war against the Dark Lord. McGonagall called him that when she wanted to warn him against harassing her precious Gryffindors—not only that, but she expected to be called Minerva. Moody, whom Albus had hired to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts this year, grumbled it as an ironic greeting when he stumped past him in the halls.

And all the while, Snape—Severus—became more and more aware how much he despised them.

The death of Harry had broken them, all of them, in ways that it should not have, given that the supposed object of the prophecy, the Potter brat who looked most like his father, was still alive. Albus's eyes were misty often now, as if he saw the end of his life approaching and was half-glad. Some essential snap had gone out of McGonagall's voice. Moody taught grimly, as if he expected his students to survive rather than triumph.

And James Potter came to the meetings of the Order of the Phoenix looking as if someone had roped him and dragged him through the mud behind a Granian.

Snape enjoyed those meetings more than he could say. He must, of course, give false details about Death Eater tactics and make sure it contradicted none of what he had said so far; he must dance around Albus's constant attempts to make him more accessible and friendly to the others; he must know that on leaving these meetings, he went straight back into the world that made him so uncomfortable, the world of Hogwarts where he taught useless information to the

children of his enemies. But for a brief hour or so—the Order of the Phoenix never gathered in one place for longer than that, these days—he could stare at his worst enemy’s face and know that he had helped kill his son and was going to find out and deliver up the location of his other, and Potter had no idea.

On this day, when he came into the room, Potter was the only one there. Snape made his footsteps as silent as smoke, and came up beside him before he could hear him or turn around.

“Si—” Potter began, turning his head. He seemed to forget that Black was dead, too, half the time. He jumped in enormous surprise, and his throat worked as he swallowed. Then he said, “Severus.”

“James,” said Snape. It was the first time he had ever willingly done as Albus told him, and called another member of the Order by his first name. Potter tensed, his hands flexing over the arms of his chair. Snape took a seat across from him, watching him carefully all the while, noting the way his head tilted and the hazel eyes behind his glasses seemed to widen in time to his panicked breathing.

“What do you want from me?”

It was the barest whisper, but Snape heard it. He made sure not to give any sign of how much it pleased him. “I want what you want, James,” he said. “The defeat of the Dark Lord, and the freedom to act in accordance with my views again.” Only the first part of that sentence was a lie.

“You’re lying,” Potter breathed.

Snape could suppress his first, startled reaction, too. No one knew the details of his spying; many of them did not even know that he had been in the graveyard when Voldemort rose, or that he regularly went back into his Lord’s service. Potter was merely striking out, hoping to hit a nerve, not aiming at what he knew would frighten Snape or expose him as a double agent. “About what?” he asked blandly.

“Wanting the defeat of You-Know-Who.” Potter stood and stalked towards him. “I know you would be just as glad to see him take over, so that you could have the pleasure of torturing my wife and son.”

As usual, Potter saw this great war of ideals and hatred and revenge all in terms of himself. Snape did not allow a muscle to move, nor the bland expression to leave his face. “Whatever lies you must tell to accustom yourself to working with your schoolboy enemy, Potter,” he said, and looked away.

“Petrificus Totalus!”

The spell bound him to the chair, of course. What Potter didn’t know was that Snape commanded enough wandless magic, in situations of intense rage, to break the binding and stand. And this had abruptly become a situation of intense rage.

He let Potter get a few steps closer, wand bouncing in his hand. He wanted to destroy the man, not merely wound him.

“Severus,” Potter mocked. “I know you’re lying, Severus. You know you’re lying. You’re as black-hearted as you ever were, and I don’t know why Albus trusts you. You only remain part of the Order so that you can carry information on our activities to—” He took a deep breath and forced the name out. “Voldemort. You knew more Dark Arts than the rest of us put together when you came to school for your first year, didn’t you? I always wondered where you learned them. Now I think I know. You grew up in gloom’s own country. Albus told me a little about your childhood, the last time I asked. Not that I think what your mother did to you excuses the way you’ve acted to my own children, just to make that clear. In fact, it only makes me wonder if you ever actually broke free of her influence.”

Snape felt a white light build behind his eyes. It burst out of him with a soundless roar that rattled the windows of the meeting house, though Snape doubted it shone through them. The Order had spells up to shield the sights inside the house from spying wizards as well as nosy Muggles.

When he could see again, the heaviness was gone from his limbs, and Potter lay on the ground, stunned, barely breathing.

Severus wasted no time. Potter was still only wildly guessing, but he might inspire the other Order members to begin distrusting him, and that would ruin Severus's own plans for remaining a double agent. And there was what he had said about his mother.

No one talked about Eileen Prince to Severus's face. Or behind his back, for that matter, and he silently promised himself that Albus would also feel his wrath, as soon as it was safe to exercise it.

He knelt beside Potter and drew a small vial of silver potion from his robe. He had created this potion, but hadn't tested it thoroughly yet. For the most part, he wouldn't have used such a liquid even on his worst enemy, because it might cause less pain than Severus wanted to create.

Now, he did not care. Or perhaps he had the faith, implicit in some Potions Masters at flying moments like an artist's faith in his work, that this one would achieve what he had made it to do. He poured it carefully down Potter's throat, and then massaged his throat muscles until he swallowed.

Then he sat back and waited until those hazel eyes fluttered and focused on him. "What happened?" Potter muttered.

"You're going to forget what really happened," said Severus, his voice calm and stern. "You'll remember that I came in, called you James, and we had an amiable discussion. It shocked you, and you accused me of being a double agent, but I reassured you I wasn't, and you believed me. Do you remember all that?"

"Yeah," Potter breathed. "Yeah, I do." He extended a hand, and Severus grasped it, pulling him to his feet. Potter pulled his hand back at once, then nodded as if embarrassed. "I'm sorry I accused you—Severus."

"Not at all, James," said Severus, and then took a seat on the chair as they waited for the others to arrive. He could feel the silver potion

stretching through Potter's veins like a liquid Imperius. He had only to whisper orders, and Potter would do what he wanted. The effect was more like a Memory Charm than Imperius, in that Severus would need to create new memories to convince him what he did was his own will, but it worked. And by the time the other members of the Order arrived, Severus and James were laughing together, and Albus smiled serenely as if his ridiculous policies had really achieved this all on their own.

Severus smiled at him, and showed none of the rage that lay inside him, gnawing on its own chain.

Albus. You fool. You do not know what you have waked in me. But you shall see son enough. How I hate you, old man.

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Snape rose with a yawn, the strips of the dream feathering around him and falling away. This time, he didn't wake up with much hatred, other than a remembered crust of hatred towards Dumbledore. He felt satisfied, as if he had accomplished something in the dream that pleased him very much.

He shrugged, and checked on his potions. The purple one was almost a game now; he made it more deadly little by little, and sometimes it smoked and overflowed and otherwise refused to obey what he asked of it. The silver potion, which would help to heal gaping Occlumency wounds like the ones Harry had suffered from Tom Riddle's attack in his second year if Snape could ever perfect it, lay shimmering in a cauldron beside that.

He turned to face the round of Potions class and the dunderhead students he would have to teach, most of them without even a tenth of Draco's or Harry's or Granger's competence. But he felt less resigned about it than he usually did, almost as if this life had been his own free choice.

He felt, for a moment, as if he walked in morning's own country.

Chapter Seventy-Five: On the Rise

Harry blinked and carefully closed the door of their bedroom behind him. It wasn't that it was all that unusual to come back to Slytherin and find Draco sprawled on his belly in the midst of a series of books and parchments. He had done it when he was still trying to visualize his Animagus form, and then again when he thought he would be able to transform a few weeks after he found it. And sometimes, when he had to write a Potions or Astronomy essay that he wanted to be near perfect, he would lose himself in a maze of words that even Hermione might envy.

Now, though, Draco had several maps hovering in the air around him, directing them with sweeps of his wand. He lay on his stomach over an enormous book, reading the words at the top of the page and moving gradually downwards as he finished one set of them. Sometimes he glanced up and waved his wand again, and one of the maps shot down to him. Draco would make a careful mark on it, and then send it back up to join the hovering circle.

Harry came nearer, making Draco jump when he sat down on the bed. He doubted Draco had seen him beyond the paper. "What are you doing?" he asked curiously. It had only been a day since his meeting with the Opallines and the Gloryflowers, and for Draco to have decided, already, that he was going to do something like this, whatever it was, was—

Unlike him. Unless he really has changed his mind about being lazy and wanting to reach for everything he can do in the last day.

Draco gave him a smile. Harry scanned it for traces of grimness or irony, and couldn't see any. "Calibrid reminded me that I need to make a place for myself in your alliance, Harry, and as more than your lover," he murmured. "But the Dark purebloods don't have any particular reason to listen to me over you; they already know you, mostly, and understand the advantages of allying with you. I don't have a pull with the undeclared wizards, and the Light purebloods are wary of me because of my family's reputation. You're better set-up to approach the magical creatures than I could ever make you, and Jing-Xi gives you a contact with the other Lords and Ladies. So I

wondered what kind of political allies I could contact and initiate diplomacy with in order to make myself indispensable—“

“You already are indispensable, Draco,” Harry said. “Please. You have to know that.” The thought that Draco would think now that Harry didn’t want him as a partner because his political connections weren’t perfect hurt.

“Oh, I know.” Draco leaned back, caressed Harry’s knee, and then kissed his right hand, which hung down near him. “And if I only cared about your opinion and mine, then I might be content with that, Harry. But I can’t. I need some political prominence and allies of my own. And I need to reverse the image that most of your allies have of me, as some spoiled and indulged pet who’s allowed to run about biting their ankles and dirtying the carpet.”

Harry choked. “Calibrid didn’t put it quite like that,” he pointed out.

“No, she didn’t.” Draco’s face was politely blank. “But that’s the way I think of it. And, right now, my opinion counts the most. I want to be better than that. And I’ve found a way.” One of the maps zipped its way over to him, and he spread it out so that Harry could see it. “What is this of?”

Harry peered at it cautiously. It looked like an unfamiliar coast, dotted with unfamiliar wizarding communities. He was just about to say so when a name he knew caught his eye, though it looked much smaller on the map than it would in real life. That would come from the map showing only the magical part of the city, he thought, and not the Muggle part. “America,” he said. “New York, and part of the coastline.”

“Very good,” Draco murmured. “We haven’t heard from the American wizarding communities. Of course, some of them think this is a European war, and they don’t think that much about what would happen if Voldemort won and left Britain. Or perhaps they think their Muggles would protect them.” Draco snorted. “They live with them, and they can think that?” He waved his wand, and the map looped back into the air, dancing with the others. “But if that attitude turns out

to be widespread among them, then it will make them that much easier to manipulate.”

“You’re looking to extend the alliance across the oceans, aren’t you?” Harry asked flatly.

Draco looked at him.

“I don’t think it’ll work,” said Harry, compelled to be honest. “Even the wizarding communities who are much closer to us aren’t taking an interest in the war. They think I can defeat Voldemort, and they don’t want to be noticed by him if I can’t. How much more is that going to apply to the Americans, since they’ve got a whole ocean between him and them?”

“Those oceans are going to look pretty damn small if he breeds flying creatures,” said Draco. “Or enchants some device that could permit intercontinental Apparition. Or, for that matter, captures the Floo Network. I’m looking ahead. I’m sure I’ll find some people among the Americans who want to do the same. Besides, Harry, you forget the larger import of your own work. It’s not the war with Voldemort that will last and last all your life. It’s your vates task. And there are magical creatures in America, too, bound so that they don’t interfere with the Muggles. There are probably more of them, in fact, since European Muggles poured in so fast that the wizards and witches didn’t have time to set up sanctuaries. They had to work with webs and do the best they could to hide them in plain sight. They knew the Muggles would kill them as exotica.”

“And they’re still bound,” Harry summarized.

“Do you see the tide of Muggle occupation growing less, at all?” Draco’s voice was dry. He waved his wand, and a different map flowed down to him. This time, Harry caught a glimpse of several lakes, and a peninsula shaped vaguely like a hand. “They had a terrible time with the freshwater sea serpents around Michigan. They’re living practically under some of the Muggles now, because there isn’t any better place to put them.”

“And if my presence breaks those webs—“

"It's not going to be pretty," Draco finished. "There are too many magical creatures side by side with Muggles, instead of off in some remote mountains or forests the way they tend to be in Europe. Oh, some are hidden, but not enough. And the American witches and wizards have this—this delusion that the way they do things is oh so much better than the ways more established magical communities do things. That includes killing magical creatures who escape their bindings, rather than risk them being seen by Muggles and having to Obliviate the Muggles."

Harry hissed between his teeth, and the shadow of a black cat appeared beside him.

"I rather thought that would irritate you." Draco sounded amused. "And the Ministry has its own customs and ways of doing things, too, including an obsession with informality that, oddly enough, still makes them infatuated with formal rituals. They'll pretend to scorn me when I contact them, but they'll be secretly flattered that someone from an old pureblood wizarding family is doing it, and they'll be impressed that it's someone with such an important place in the alliance. I really don't think they would accept that someone like Calibrid Opalline could still be just as important to you. It'll look better that it's your partner."

"I—this is wonderful, Draco," Harry said, a little helplessly. He hadn't thought of reaching out to the Americans for help. He had so much to do that he'd focused on moving forward, and preparing to fight the concrete threats that Jing-Xi could tell him about. But perhaps it was time that he thought of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow surviving, even thriving, beyond the immediate purpose of freeing British magical creatures. "I don't know if you'll be ready to do all this immediately."

"Oh, I'm not." Draco indicated the immense book he lay on. "I've been reading the history of magical communities in America, and I'll read more. By the time I contact them, I want to be able to make them dance to my tune. I might be able to do that right now with a British wizard, but I'm smart enough to realize the limits to my knowledge. They just won't be limits much longer." He smiled.

He looked so smug that Harry couldn't help himself; he leaned in to kiss him, and Draco returned it with interest. When he heard parchment creak and crackle around them, though, Harry pulled back. "I'm interrupting your studying," he said innocently. "Of course you'll want to finish that first."

Draco groaned and reached out as Harry moved backward, though his hand fell short on the bed. "Harry, it's been a week..."

"But it won't be much longer," said Harry, and winked. "The vernal equinox is in just a few days, remember?"

Draco lifted himself on his elbows and stared at him steadily. Harry stared back. He knew Draco read the silent challenge in his eyes. So far, Draco seemed intent on keeping his promise to live up to his potential and strive for greatness, but it was only one day since Calibrid had so stung him. There was no saying that he would keep up his intensity until the vernal equinox.

"You'll be spending the day with someone you can be proud of, Harry," Draco said, when the stare had lasted long enough to make them both, apparently, feel slightly uncomfortable.

Harry inclined his head, and withdrew.

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Draco glanced at the bed. The papers and parchments he'd been studying earlier were safely out of the way. The enormous History of Wizards in America that he'd used to start working his way into, well, the history of wizards in America lay on the bedside table, nearly tipping it. Even their trunks were shoved back against the wall, and Draco had gently but firmly put Argutus out the door when the Omen snake had tried to enter earlier.

He closed his eyes.

He knew now, humiliatingly, why he hadn't been able to do this so far. How many books had he read in which he'd seen some sentence

about will, and how important it was? He could want to achieve this, but until he really focused his will and aimed it towards the desired end, he would always fail.

Now he did not intend to fail. He gave himself over to the swimming desire. He was in one place. The vision he wanted to reach stood at the other end. He had to cover the ground between himself and it, and this first time, he had to do it with nothing but will.

The books had advised him to go more slowly, but Draco had done that, and nothing happened. He simply couldn't be determined one day, and then slightly more determined the next. It had to occur all at once, or it would never occur.

Draco bent himself towards the task.

It was hard. He felt as if scrambled forward with an enormous load of rock on his back. His head was bent, and sweat trickled down his neck, and distracting noises came floating up from the Slytherin common room. He could hear Syrinx pacing on the other side of the door where he'd exiled her, if he listened hard enough. He could imagine Harry bursting into the room and disrupting his concentration.

He could imagine sagging back onto the bed and saying it was all too much. He hadn't told Harry about this, just in case he did fail. So there would be no one to scold him for not achieving it.

Except himself.

Wrong or not, the general magical community had an impression of him that Draco had never intended. It was up to him to correct that impression. Spreading rumors of his magical competence would not do it. Promising to work harder and then never working harder would not do it. Telling Harry of what he wanted and receiving praise would only mean that he put off the effort, because he could live for weeks on Harry's praise.

And that was another reason he was doing this, wasn't it? He had something unique to offer to Harry's alliance if he could master this. Oh, sure, there were a few other people helping Harry who could do

the same thing, but they all had the advantage, or disadvantage, of being known for it. Draco could hide his skill, because no one would expect him to have it. That might save their lives on a battlefield someday, or on a spying mission. Voldemort would guard against those people he knew to have this skill, but not against Draco.

That got him past one twist and turn of the passage. The image he wanted to reach had drawn a little closer.

And there was the image of what Harry's face would look like if he found out that Draco could do it. Draco imagined a pair of arms gathering him closer, a pair of wide green eyes shining with approval and joy. Perhaps Harry would even break the self-declared fast of sex that was lasting until the vernal equinox, and share the bed with Draco for something other than sleeping.

The image was closer now, bristling. And Draco had the feeling that the hardest part of concentration yet lay ahead. Neither the thought of Harry's approval nor improving his own reputation would carry him through this rocky country; he'd already used them as climbing rope.

He panted. For a moment, his concentration did waver, and almost break into pieces. But then he leaped sideways, and caught the rope he needed.

He wanted to do this for his own sake, too. If he could be more than he'd always thought he was, if other people had seen this greatness in him and he hadn't, then he wanted to have that potential. The way to have that potential was not by making efforts and then slipping back. Other wizards might do that, but not a Malfoy. Not a wizard like him, always stronger and better than other people thought he was.

Not Draco.

He burst through the last stretch separating him from the image. And suddenly it was easier. The rocks he'd carried and climbed fell all about him, tumbling light. His body lowered and grew stronger, and then he was through, tumbling, his mental self colliding with the image and wrapping it all about himself.

Draco cried out as he felt his bones shift and his face elongate, his body shrink and his skin ripple and turn inside out. It hurt, an instant of compressed agony that might have been enough to make him give up the transformation. But all the books had said that once it began to happen, physically, the hardest part was past. It was the concentration that took all the time and effort.

He opened his eyes, aching as if someone had grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and slammed him into multiple walls, but also aware of an intense feeling of accomplishment. He stood and stepped forward. For a moment, human knowledge and animal instincts fought in him, and then the instincts won and Draco found himself moving easily on four legs.

He stared into the mirror he'd left leaning near the wall. After a moment, he spun around and examined his reflection from the back, because he positively could not believe that an animal could be so handsome.

He was a white fox, just as he had seen in his vision. His fur was a deep cream color, so that he wouldn't shine unnaturally beneath the moonlight, but stood some chance of blending into snow. His paws were neat, quick, and light. His eyes were gray, and he had no marking anywhere on his body except a slight strip of black around his muzzle and mouth that served to accent his equally black nose.

His nose! Scents were flooding him, when Draco could pay attention to anything but the way he looked. His ears flagged up and down, and he could hear sounds through the walls that his Housemates would be embarrassed by if they knew about them. His brush swished softly back and forth, a living thing on its own. When Draco paid attention to it, then it grew heavy and awkward and slow, but it picked up speed again the moment he started watching it from the corner of his eye and mind.

He had done it. He had achieved his Animagus form before any of the others had. And he had done it because of the strength of his will.

Smug, Draco reached for the will to transform back, and found that this came much more easily. He knew what it was like to be a wizard,

after all, had known for most of his life, and the shape of large limbs and an unsensing body snapped into place about him. Draco found himself staggering, half in and half out of his clothes, and blinking at the mirror.

He tried to change back into a fox.

A short uphill struggle this time, and he could do it. Draco turned around to admire the color of his fur again.

The bedroom door opened. Harry's irritated voice said, "Draco, why were Argutus and Syrinx outside—"

Draco turned and trotted towards him. He heard Harry's voice die. When he looked up, he couldn't read his expression well—not only was he further away from Harry's face than usual, but his fox eyes saw things differently—but he didn't have to. The flush on those cheeks and the scent around him told how much he approved.

Draco jumped neatly into Harry's arms, and settled back, and waited for praise.

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Connor decided he'd had enough of that.

"That" was Draco staring at him all the damn time. Granted, he mostly did it in Defense Against the Dark Arts, given that that was the one class where Draco sat behind him and could do it most easily, but sometimes he stared at meals, too, and whenever they passed each other in the corridors. When Connor came to visit Harry in the Slytherin common room, Draco sat on a chair nearby and rarely tried to join the conversation unless specifically invited, instead murmuring a few "yes" or "no" responses, and staring at Connor.

He caught Draco's arm as the other boy left Defense Against the Dark Arts, and turned him so that his back was to the wall. Draco smirked at him, and glanced down at Connor's hand. "I hate to tell you this, Potter, but I'm already thoroughly taken."

Connor dropped his arm as if it were made of dragonfire, before realizing that was exactly what Draco had intended him to do. He settled for a snort and a disgusted look.

"You've been watching me," he said. "I want to know why."

And then Draco paused and licked his lips and looked nervous. As the moments passed and there was no Slytherin, sly answer forthcoming immediately, Connor's interest grew. So this wasn't a game after all, then, or an attempt to make him feel uncomfortable around his future brother-in-law. It was something more serious, and that might mean Draco wasn't perfectly confident. Connor preferred that. He had some chance of disconcerting Draco in turn.

"I've been trying to see the past Connor and the future Connor in you," said Draco, which sent Connor back into a state of confusion.

"What do you mean by that?"

"It—there was that Pensieve Harry gave me for Christmas," Draco said. "Filled with memories of times I hadn't actually shared with him, mostly childhood memories. And you're there so often. In so many of them, the most important person in Harry's life. I wanted to know what you were like." He made a vague gesture at Connor's chest. "And I wanted to know how you could be like—this. You've changed since then, but I don't know how you did it."

"Of course you don't," said Connor, and stepped back from Draco, relaxing. It wasn't so very wonderful that he should want to know, was it? Draco was practically shouting his intention to change to the whole school. Since Connor had had to shift his own perception of and actions around Harry so dramatically, he was probably the best one suited to give him advice. "Not even Harry knows. By the time he really started looking, I'd already accomplished most of it."

"So tell me how," Draco said.

Connor shrugged, and half-closed his eyes, forcing himself to return to memories that, by now, had lost their sting and become part of his daily reality. "After—Sirius killed himself, and I heard the truth about

the prophecy and watched Harry free the Dementors, I realized how much of what I'd believed was built on lies. Harry helped me a bit with the grief, and so did James and Remus, but so many people had sheltered me from the world most of my life. I wanted to think about things on my own. So I pretended I was more healed than I actually was. Harry was so tied up in his attempts to get along with Dad, and then with dealing with the beginnings of this alliance he's got now and with Snape, that he didn't notice. Dad might have, but he was more occupied with getting Harry back from Snape, and Remus was grieving for Sirius.

"So I could think about things like the end of considering myself as the Boy-Who-Lived without anyone interfering. And I saw two roads I could take. One ended in resentment of Harry, jealousy of him for having the title I'd always believed I was mine. And the other ended with being content with my own ordinariness, and a support for him instead of a rival or an obstacle. That was the road I chose. I worked as hard as I could to accustom myself to what I am now. I told myself every day that Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived. I made myself try to see the way Dad and Mum—I mean, James and Lily—" Connor had fallen far enough into his story to forget himself "—had really acted around him, instead of just assuming they'd treated us the same. When I flew, I remembered that Harry could do better.

"And I saw all the things he'll never have, all the things I can do that he never can. He doesn't even notice when someone loves him, most of the time. I know when someone loves me. He has a hard time asserting his own will and insisting on his own rights. I don't. He torments himself over his mistakes. I don't. I love Harry, but there is no way under the sun that I would want to be him."

He thought, for a moment, of telling Draco about the noticing he'd started to do lately, and how he thought that was probably Harry's fault, not Parvati's. But he couldn't bring himself to. For one thing, he still sort of hoped the noticing would go away, and he wouldn't have to be what it was calling him to be. For another, Draco didn't really care about that, about him. Connor was wise enough to know that. Draco cared about him in relation to Harry, and if he could understand Connor better, he would get along with him better, and

that would please Harry. What Draco Malfoy did, he did with himself as the center of the universe and the only point of reference.

And, finally, Connor wasn't sure how to describe the noticing without sounding stupid. So he'd noticed that Lavender Brown was very kind to the Gryffindor fifth-years, and that Dean always stared off into space just before he started panting, and that Neville had kept a little plant alive on his windowsill for weeks that wasn't supposed to stay alive in this climate? So what? It sounded stupid.

"Thanks, Connor."

He opened his eyes, and blinked. It wasn't like Draco to call him by his first name. But now he had, and now he even nodded and moved away stiffly, as if cradling the new knowledge to himself made it difficult to walk.

Connor shook his head in bemusement, and went to go study his Animagus transformation. He had made it part of the way to the boar image last night before falling back. That was all right, Peter had said. Just keep driving forward, and he would reach it eventually. And a boar was a perfectly fine form to have. Blunt, strong, cleverer than many people thought they were, able to bring down barriers that separated them from others.

On the way back to Gryffindor Tower, Connor noticed three secret sneers, one blossoming romance, and the sources of two future disputes. The result was that he flopped back on his bed when he reached the Tower and scowled at his ceiling instead of beginning to study right away.

Stupid noticing.

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Harry woke on the day of the vernal equinox feeling both smug and hopeful. He thought, he really thought, that Draco had changed enough that what he'd planned for the first day of spring could happen after all.

He'd worked through most of his correspondence and all his homework during the rest of the week, and he was sure that leaving for a few days would harm nothing. And he wanted to leave for a few days. He wanted to show Draco what he had planned, and he wanted—

He wanted a holiday, damn it.

He'd wrestled with the thought for a long time. He'd thought, at first, that it was selfish of him, and then that Christmas ought to be enough, or the upcoming Easter holidays. But Christmas had been ruined by the news of the Horcruxes and what he'd have to do to neutralize them, and Harry couldn't be sure something else wouldn't happen between now and Easter to upset his plans. So he was going to take Draco away for a few days following the equinox, the balanced day of Light and Dark, the moment when power passed from Dark to Light, and he would refuse to worry about any of the other problems that could plague him for the space of that time.

He went down to breakfast humming quietly, and received the owl that came from Hogsmeade with a smile. Draco was late, but Harry had expected that. Since it was the equinox itself, Draco would want to do something dramatic. Harry ate with an eye on the doors to the Great Hall.

Draco stood there a moment later. He came at once to Harry, his stride more confident than it had been since long before the day when Calibrid scolded him. Harry allowed himself to sit back and admire for a moment. Draco looked so much better when he forgot to worry about defending his own sulky desires, and instead set about influencing what other people thought of him.

If he wants to dispute the Grand Unified Theory, he should write against it, Harry thought, as he stood. Not whinge about it and expect people to listen to him that way.

Draco met him with a kiss and a murmured instruction to sit down. Then he drew his wand with a flourish. "I have a new spell to show you, Harry," he said. "One that I'd been thinking about for the past few days, but which I just worked last night."

Harry sat down with what he knew was a giddy smile on his face, but he didn't care. What mattered was that Draco had made a new spell. He loved the moments when Draco showed off his power and his will and what, together, they could produce. If nothing else, it moved Draco further out from under his shadow, and gave him more freedom and independence.

Draco held his wand in front of him and closed his eyes. A moment later, a trickling yellow light began to play from it, and formed into a ring in the air. Harry leaned forward, seeing an unfamiliar image through it. It looked like a coastline, a rocky one that might have been in Northumbria or Ireland or Scotland itself.

The incantation Draco used must have been nonverbal, because Harry continued to hear no words as the image slowly swayed back and forth, seeking something. Then it focused on a figure walking majestically towards the water's edge.

Harry hissed in his breath. "Falco!" he whispered.

"Yes," Draco said. His voice trembled with strain. "The spell—seeks out one of your greatest enemies, and then shows them to you. I was going to try for—Voldemort, but I thought it was too risky."

"Too right," Harry muttered, eyes focused on Falco. He had knelt beside the rocks, and stirred one hand in the shallow waves now, eyes fixed on what looked to be water no deeper than a tidepool.

Then the water wrinkled, and a sleek head lifted itself from the surface, long yellow hair flooding down its shoulders. Harry hissed again. It was a siren, one of the merfolk Voldemort had freed from their web in Greece and hunted Britain's coasts with for a time. Scrimgeour had warned Harry that Falco seemed to be spending time near the coasts, but Harry had not known that he had come so far as to get a siren to speak to him.

Falco said something now that the spell didn't pick up. The siren nodded, and pulled her head back beneath the water. Falco stood up, still gazing into the ocean, a tired expression on his face.

He Apparated. The spell's image went dark for a moment, and then he appeared in a clearing that made Harry sit up. He knew that clearing. It was in the Forbidden Forest, not so very far from Hogwarts.

Falco extended his hands, and they were full of wooden disks, which were familiar to Harry from a certain attack Voldemort had instituted on the autumnal equinox the year before last. He began to place the disks in a circle around himself. Harry had no doubt that he intended to use them the same way, to command sirens to attack up bays and rivers and so on as Voldemort had—perhaps even send them up the Thames into London itself.

"Draco," Harry said. "Does this spell show what's happening right now?"

"It's supposed to," Draco said warily.

Harry stepped away from the table, his breath already rushing freely in his lungs, his hand clenched. The silver hand flexed and bent a bit, but still wasn't accustomed enough to his body to obey him completely.

"Listen, Draco," he said. "You've definitely earned what I meant to give you for the equinox, but now it appears that I have to teach Falco a lesson."

"Harry—"

Falco, in the image, raised his hand.

A moment later, the sirens' compelling voices rang out from the Hogwarts lake, striking through the school's wards as if they weren't there, twining around the ears of students and making them face the doors of the Great Hall glassy-eyed.

Harry grimaced and ran, weaving wards behind him that ought to keep the other students inside for at least a little while; under

compulsion, they wouldn't be thinking rationally enough to dismantle them immediately.

So much for my holiday.

Chapter Seventy-Six: The Duel of Phoenix and Siren

Harry came out on the shore of the lake, sure that he'd brushed through wards as if they were spiderwebs, but not remembering if he had or not. His gaze was focused ahead, on the water and the sirens swimming there. He could see darker, darting shapes he assumed were the selkies, the usual inhabitants of the lake. The sirens swam with their heads lifted, their faces distended as they sang, but not enough to make them less beautiful. They were Dark creatures, every part of them made to compel and lure. Harry didn't think there was anything that would make them less beautiful.

I'll have to silence them and lessen their hold over the other students and professors first, Harry thought, as he narrowed his eyes at them. Otherwise, Falco could command someone to attack me or hold them in a hostage situation, and I hardly need that when I'm trying to stop him from sending sirens to the attack in other waters, too.

He tried a simple Silencing Charm first. Nothing happened. Harry nodded. He had thought it wouldn't—if it were that simple, then most wizards would have escaped siren clutches instead of falling prey to them—but he had wanted to make sure.

He could feel the strands of compulsion flicking into his mind, trying to weave webs around his thoughts. His will sliced them and speared them and dragged them away, but there were more and more as the sirens saw him, admitted him as someone dangerous, and focused their music on him.

I'll have to answer their weapon with a weapon.

Harry opened his mouth and called on the phoenix song.

It welled up from his throat as if it had been waiting for this exact moment, like a phoenix sitting in a bush and invisible until it was noticed. Harry felt the first rush of notes exit his mouth like the bouncing pebbles that heralded a landslide. When that passed, the landslide itself could come, a percussive symphony that made Harry feel a bit dazed to think he was making those sounds.

The sirens swam nearer and nearer the shore. Their leader, one with long, fluffy blonde curls, blue eyes, and a crown of twisted driftwood and pearls on her head, folded her arms on the bank and leaned forward to press her voice against Harry. A core of cool water slid down Harry's skin. He could feel the temptation to relax, to give in. The siren plucked at his desires for a holiday like fingers on the strings of a harp. He had only to yield, and he could have that pleasure he'd dreamed of. He liked to swim, didn't he? He could swim in this song, and no one would bother him.

Harry smiled, a bit grimly. The trap might even have caught him if he weren't used to having his holidays spoiled and his relaxation interrupted.

He flung the phoenix song like a spear at the siren, and she reeled back, catching herself just before she sank. She flipped her head up and hissed, and Harry caught a glimpse of sharp, curved fangs hiding among her ordinary teeth. A faint red mark was appearing on her pale cheek, as if she'd been burned.

Blue fire appeared around Harry in the same moment, wrapping his arms and his neck and his torso. He sang through it, spreading his voice like a net above the surface of the lake.

The phoenix was the singer of the Light, and the sirens the singers of the Dark. And they were creatures of water, and he was a creature—or at least the host of a creature—of fire. They were natural enemies.

At the same time, he didn't want to kill them. He merely wanted to break the web of their compulsion and drive them back. Harry knew that as soon as he stopped singing, though, or grew tired, they would renew their attack. They had agreed to aid Falco, from the image in Draco's spell. That meant they wouldn't simply swim free from his control as they had with Voldemort. They wanted this, this free source of prey that Falco had promised them.

He would have to come to some kind of compromise with them.

While, at the same time, fighting Falco, and making sure that they were held back from attacking people in the Thames and through whatever other bays or lakes or rivers Falco had sent them to.

Harry grinned, and thought the expression, to be proper, should be bloody and filled with half-chewed flesh.

I've done harder things, haven't I? he thought, and then paced forward, his eyes fixed on the siren queen. When she moved, he could see tendrils spreading out from her, clear glassy tunnels that tugged on the ears of the other sirens. More tendrils projected to north and east and south, though Harry had to squint to see them.

She's their queen. She's bound to them. And what influences her may influence them.

Harry aimed the phoenix song down the middle of that web. As he watched, the glass glittered and turned golden, lit as if by sunrise, and then his music shot away from him and down towards the distant places where other sirens swam.

And what should I sing of, to convince them?

Harry lifted his head and sang of freedom.

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Falco sighed when he heard Harry's voice. The boy was simply determined to oppose his plans, wasn't he?

But he was not as angry as he once would have been. He was too tired.

Hunting among the paths of Dark and Light, as well as cornering the wild Dark and demanding it teach him, was hard, endless labor. He had done the best he could, because he was fighting for the most sacred of causes, the balance of the British wizarding world.

But he carried the marks of his lessons on his body, and he always would. He almost looked forward to the death that he assumed would

come now, when he faced Harry and Harry Declared Light to balance him.

But what mattered was that his death would restore the balance, and prevent Harry from being either undeclared or vates. He had to keep his gaze on that goal, and use it to pull himself through the hard, muddy roads that lay between him and that final, redeeming moment. He only hoped that he would live to see it.

He had visited Tom, and learned his technique for controlling the sirens, as well as a few other tactics that a Dark Lord would use. It had hurt his sense of the fitness of things to see Tom lying in the dirt, as if he did not understand the importance of his power and the position he would have again. Yes, Harry had cut a hole in his magical core, but there were ways to get past that, and Tom would find them.

Falco lifted an arm and held it up to the sky. He felt the wild Dark's attention center on him. Until sunset and the balancing moment, the Dark was still in control of this part of the year, slightly more powerful than the Light. And it paid attention when such a powerful wizard made a gesture that looked like the beginning of a Declaration ritual. Falco had felt it patiently dogging his steps as he set up this trap, and now it hovered just out of sight, sometimes watching the sirens and sometimes watching him.

"I yield myself," he began. "I yield my power, my magic, my soul, my heart, my mind, my body. I accept the strictures of wildness against order, of compulsion against free will, of war against peace, of solitude against cooperation, of deception against truth." He took a deep breath. "I Declare myself Dark, and name myself a Dark Lord."

The magic in his chest coalesced into a single bolt, which he flung into the sky. Above him, it turned and swirled dark green, as if his power had bruised it. Then the wild Dark caught the bolt, strengthened it, and sent it roaring back to him like an arrow fledged with night. Falco dropped to one knee as it hit him, but made sure it was only one knee. The wild Dark did not truly care for submission on the part of its wizards, even as it demanded that some acknowledgment of its greater power was made.

Falco took a deep breath, and counted the days over in his head. He would, of course, attack when he had the best chance of winning, even though he did not really believe he could win. This was meant only as a prelude, to show that he was serious and could act like a Dark Lord, in case Harry was tempted to doubt him.

Forty days. He would attack on Walpurgis Night, of course, the night when the wild Dark was in full force.

He felt claws hook around his shoulders as the wild Dark settled on him, and glanced to the side to see that it had sent him a dark bird, like a blackbird if one discounted the glossy blue markings on its wings. It hooked one foot through its beak and gave him a truly evil stare through one small eye.

Falco faced forward and began to prepare his next attack. He had studied Tom's tactics and the history of the Dark's magic to learn how this was done, but he had some of his own ideas, too. Harry had hit him with a flood of memories in the Department of Mysteries that Falco had not been prepared for.

But he could absorb those memories, and learn them, and make weapons out of them.

He took the first blade in hand, and held it tight, while he gazed into the distance, towards the shore of the lake, and watched Harry wrestle with his sirens.

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Rufus blinked, feeling as if he'd just awakened from a dream.

It was the most interesting feeling. He'd been sitting in his office, speaking with Elder Juniper about what further concessions to the magical creature the Wizengamot was prepared to make, when an image of water had surged in front of him. He couldn't immediately tell if the water was the river or the sea, and it hadn't seemed to matter. He should walk out of his office, and keep walking until he saw it. Then he should plunge forward. He need not worry about

drowning. There would be hands waiting to catch him. He could almost see the hands, in fact, rising pale arms that gleamed as if from the reflection of lit water.

And then the compulsion had faded, and now he was hearing music, a rising and skirling song that made his heart beat faster and filled his eyes with tears. Rufus shook his head and turned away from Juniper. The Elder would never forget such a weakness, and Rufus must find out what had caused it soon.

That was when he noticed that the Elder seemed to be having some troubles of his own, at least if the cough and the fist that scrubbed at his face were any indication. Of course, he recovered soon after. Juniper was a politician, and one who had survived years of power changes in the Ministry bobbing relatively near the surface—too powerful to indiscriminately anger, too weak to be seen as a threat every time the power change happened. “The bloody hell’s that?” he demanded now, and his voice was gruff to conceal the presence of his own sorrow.

Rufus tapped his wand against the office’s enchanted window in answer. It sped through several views that showed various glimpses of London in which nothing remarkable happened. Then they appeared to hover above the Thames, and Rufus saw its gray waters churning as magical creatures swam free around the foot of a Muggle bridge. From flashes of yellow hair, and given what had happened to him just a moment ago, he would guess they were sirens.

Hovering in the middle of the air above them, as much on display to Muggle London as the dragon had been, was the misty image of a young man wreathed in blue fire, singing in the voice of a phoenix.

“Harry vates,” said Rufus. That should have been my first guess.

“Must he be so public in everything he does?” Juniper demanded, leaning over Rufus’s shoulder to frown out the window. “The other Ministries are going to think we’re holding a damn festival for the Muggles. Come learn about dragons! Come see that phoenixes are real!” He waved a disgusted hand.

"I don't think he means to be," said Rufus, and sat back with a little sigh to wait for the end of the display. "He's saving the world again, Elder, and that is sometimes a rather noisy endeavor."

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Harry talked to the sirens.

He made every note he shed carry images of open water, oceans where Muggles never came, rocks where the sirens could sun themselves and never have to duck under the water for fear of a passing ship, air that would carry their voices to charm fish and dolphins and never leave them in fear of a sailor. Blue poured through his voice, and green, and the silver-white of foam. Did the sirens really mean to swim in this crowded, contaminated water for the rest of their lives? The seas around Britain swarmed with rubbish, with humans, with ships. But the oceans beyond the horizon were there, wastes of water only to those who could not see, as the sirens could, as Harry could, the remarkable freedom in them.

The siren queen answered slowly, clotted music pushing through her mouth. They had made a bargain. They would help the old wizard, and charm Muggles and wizards into the water. It fulfilled their deepest instincts. They were creatures of compulsion. They could not help but do what they were doing. The vision Harry offered was attractive, but without people to compel, an essential part of themselves was missing.

Harry changed his song, made it sharp and merciless. He showed the siren queen how she had served Voldemort, how she had served Falco, how she had done nothing but swarm around the coasts of Britain for months because she had to have some master to guide her. And was that really either being at liberty or compelling the people she wanted to compel? He knew the sirens were capable of greater things, that they did not need to depend on humans. But if she wanted to, if she wished to turn her back on greater things to answer some petty conception that wizards had formed of her people, then of course she could do so.

The music flowed more freely from the siren queen's mouth now. Of course she did not wish to serve others. But it was what they did.

And had they ever considered anything else?

Harry pitched the phoenix song high, his mind on Fawkes in the last dance he had done, so glorious and so wonderful that the thought of caging him seemed absurd. Phoenixes chose whom they bonded to, whom they served, if they served anyone at all, and they retained the will to leave an unworthy companion. And wizards respected them for that, for their freedom, as they would never respect sirens.

That was absurd in and of itself, the queen's voice said, filling Harry's mind with images of lapping, hot pools of dark water. Of course they should respect sirens. Sirens could kill them, and phoenixes would not.

But even they had the ability, Harry said, and cast out intricacies of warbles that charted the way around sharp beaks and curved, gleaming scarlet talons. Wizards knew there was a touch of danger in them. But they loved them nonetheless. And they would not love sirens.

We need no man's love, the queen sang.

Harry smiled, and strung his response, a series of rests and high notes that leaped and rose and dipped like waves and troughs, along her reasoning. They didn't need human love, did they? Any more than they needed human respect, or human victims. They could swim free of all of this. Their lives would only intersect with humanity's when they decided they should do so. They had gone from one master to another, really. Voldemort's trick of breaking their web had been only a trick. He had enslaved them again at once.

Would they like to see what it was like not to be slaves?

And voices answered from everywhere, bay and inlet and lake and ocean and river running to the sea. Yes.

Harry ignored the ache in his throat that came from his tiring voice. He could do this. He would spin them a vision of freedom so enchanting that they would never want to come closer to shore than the side of a rock where they could sit and comb their hair. They should have their own existence, separate from everything a human could conceive. Harry would not be able to paint the whole of it, since he was human, but he would show them the traces of it and hope they would follow them.

And then he staggered, because a memory had hit him like a knife. Suddenly he could not see the lake, or the grass at his feet. Suddenly, he could see nothing but the day that Lily had told him he would never have a lover or a family, because he was needed to protect Connor. He felt as if he were seven years old, and the reasoning echoed from every corner of his mind, picking up resonances from his training, whispering in circles that he could not break.

Harry flung his voice against the bonds. It didn't seem to make a difference. The memory closed in on him and constricted him like a net, and he felt himself shrinking to match it. Other memories flickered past him, fading when he grasped at them. Draco, and Regulus, and Snape, were fading, fading, fading, and he did not know why.

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Falco had spun his web carefully.

Its heart, its spider if one willed, was the memory of Harry being told he would never have a family or a lover of his own. That was powerful. But, by itself, it would have done no good. If Harry had simply lived through the experience at one time, the most Falco could have hoped to do was distract him with the image.

The anchors of the web were the corners of Harry's mind where he still wished for a life something like that of his childhood self. Falco found envy of a girl undergoing war witch training, for the simplicity of her existence and her ability to put emotion away at a moment's notice. He found a time just a few months ago when Harry had tried to slide all his negative reactions into Occlumency pools, and what

had happened when that attempt failed; along with the relief had come self-disgust, that he could not manage it. He found a dream, suffered more than a year ago under Tom's curse, of a world where Harry existed only to make alliances for his brother, and how happy it made him, a deep and soaring joy that he'd taken care to shield from his allies. In small and scattered parts of himself, Harry still wished to be what he had been. If nothing had ever changed, his life would have hurt much less, and he would not need to take so much responsibility for so many positions he felt inadequate for.

What made the trap perfect was that it depended on what Harry wanted. Let Falco set up the web, and Harry's mind would weave it for him.

He stepped back, holding his breath as he watched. This might be the moment when Harry Declared, after all, he thought. Urge him deeply enough, and Harry would have to call on the Light, and use its power to rise from the trap.

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"What's happening now?" Juniper demanded abruptly.

Rufus, who'd looked away from the struggle in the sky to the paperwork on his desk, glanced back, and then stood. "I don't know," he said. His voice rippled and shook with tension. He couldn't be bothered to worry about that, or what effect it might have on Juniper's future treatment of him.

Something had happened. Something was going wrong.

The misty image of Harry bound in phoenix fire had faded. Now it only showed as a dim outline against a much stronger image of a white spider crouched in the middle of a black-and-white spider web. Through the web whispered two voices, voices which Rufus could hear as well as he had the phoenix song a moment before, and, seemingly, the siren song before that, though he did not remember the siren song as an experience of music.

Harry, you'll never have children.

Why not, Mum?

Because children take time. They take almost all your time when they're little, and they would be little for several years. Do you remember being little for several years?

Some of it.

Rufus shuddered. He recognized Lily Potter's voice, and Harry's, though it was younger than it sounded now, of course. He was not sure what made him wince more—the thought of what this scene being played out over London right now meant for the defense against the sirens, or the fact that he had a seat right next to something this private, now dragged out on the stage of the public sky like a flayed corpse.

And you would have to devote all your time to them, and to your spouse or partner.

I wouldn't have any time for Connor!

Of course you wouldn't. And it wouldn't be fair to your spouse or partner, would it? Just like it wouldn't be fair to your father if I had someone to serve like you have Connor, and I spent all my time away from him.

Juniper touched his shoulder. Rufus, feeling sick, glanced up at him, only to find the Elder's eyes fixed on the sky.

"And now what's happening?"

Rufus blinked and turned back to the struggling sea of images, trying as best as he could to ignore the voices.

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A longing to relax and let the memory wrap him swept Harry. He could go back into the egg, and then everything would be over. No one but Falco would ever know it had been weakness that made him

surrender, and not simply the Dark Lord's overwhelming strength. He had the magic of the wild Dark backing him now, making the web, a tool of compulsion, thicker and stronger. No one would ever know what had happened. And Harry himself would lose the memories, and never know he had been anything different than what he was now.

He still wanted that simple life. He still thought it would be easier, when he was exhausted from a long day of making mistakes that other people would never have made, to give in and let his training have its way.

He had told Draco that some of his sacrificial instincts were never going away. That was true. They were too deeply buried in him. He would always bear some scars, would never be completely healed.

And it was those same instincts that saved him now, sparking out like shards of broken bone or eggshell from the sides of his mind, and slicing through the strands of the web where they tried to come down.

Oh, yes, it would be comfortable to surrender, but since when had comfort ever been a priority of his, or something he needed?

And oh, yes, he would be happy, since for him the world would never have changed from what it was when he was a child, but what about Draco, Snape, Regulus, Connor, Peter, all those who had learned to know and love him the way he was? They would be devastated. He could not do that to them.

What would happen to the sirens, and the vision of freedom he had promised them? What would happen to the other magical creatures? Harry could not abandon them, either. It was not something a true vates would do. For the sake of others, he had to continue with the same degree of freedom he had now.

He whirled through the strands of the web, and cut it loose. A stray thought did whisper to him as he watched it drift through his mind, a bit of displaced silk.

If there was a way that I could still accomplish everything I need to do, but not feel the emotions...

And then he remembered that, no, he needed the emotions, because Draco needed them from him. And his affection was the only thing that seemed to get through to Snape, not his rational arguments. Harry hissed and shook his head in irritation. Yes, he had changed, and he was too adult to go back into what he had been as a child, but it was still a shock, to be confronted with how much he had changed.

He faced the sirens again, and saw the siren queen drifting with her eyes fixed on him, uncertain.

Bring it home now.

Harry channeled his anger through the phoenix song, making what had begun as fury at his own enslavement into fury at the mere thought of slavery, of any creature and to any master. The sirens should swim free, out into waves where they would never see the sight of a human being. They should dive as deeply as they could, explore the secrets of the ocean bottom that no one else would see. What lay in the water? Harry, limited and trapped by his human body, could never know. The sirens could.

And then the siren queen's voice turned to align itself with his, like one fish of a school swimming the same way as another. And then more and more turned, and Harry felt the sirens in London and elsewhere face the stream that was running to the sea. Turn, and turn, and plunge. They would go home. No mere human could stop them, and no mere human could command them.

Why would I want to? Harry replied, through the medium of the phoenix voice.

The siren queen laughed at him, and said, Because all wizards have that element of desire to command, and then plunged away before Harry could tell her he did not. When he opened his eyes, the school was gone from the lake in front of him, swimming into hidden tunnels in the bed and sides, too small for any human to access, but which would carry them ultimately to the ocean.

Harry's throat was so sore he didn't think he could speak aloud for hours, and his mind felt like stirred rubbish. He wanted to collapse. But instead he turned to the Forbidden Forest and Falco, because that was what he was supposed to do.

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Falco felt the moment when his trap failed, and he sighed, because, although he understood the memories of Harry's childhood much more than he had when he first faced his enemy, he did not understand the memories of Harry's adulthood. Obviously, Harry had changed since his seventh year, and the fleeting desires he felt to go back to what he had been were not strong enough to overcome all the changes, bridge all the gaps and lead him back.

He waited until Harry was close enough to see him go, and then changed into his sea eagle form. Harry tilted his head back to watch him lift. He did snap out a few spells, but Falco's shields, of course, were firm and simply deflected the magic. Falco was stronger than Harry was. Strange, that someone small and weak, in terms of Lords and Ladies in the world, could cause such trouble.

Harry watched him with the simple, uncompromising, piercing stare of a hawk.

Falco sighed again and shook his head, turning for the distant skyline. He would face Harry on Walpurgis, and he suspected he would be facing his own death.

But the Dark flew with him now, a reservoir of untapped power, like a black companion eagle, singing in his ears and whispering promises that things would be different next time. Falco supposed he could do worse than listen.

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Fire and song burst back into the world again, so brilliant that Rufus had to cover his eyes, and had the urge to cover his ears. So loud, so shining, so insistent on freedom that for a moment he wanted to jump out his office window—though it was false, enchanted to show any

view he wanted but not actually a window—and find his own waterway that would lead to the sea.

When the song faded, he lifted his hand to see that the Thames was free of sirens. There were Muggles halted on the bridge, though, pointing to both the sky and the river. Rufus shook his head. The Obliviators would be busy tonight.

“So that’s Harry saving the world.”

Rufus glanced at Juniper. The Elder had sat back in his chair and looped his hands together around his belly, his frown still directed at the place where the image and the memory of Harry had gleamed.

“One way he does it, yes,” said Rufus. “Granted, this was a bit more public than usual. When he went into the Department of Mysteries, I’m certain that no Muggles saw him.”

“I have never been this close,” said Juniper calmly, as if they were discussing some neutral magical phenomenon. “It was—rather different from what I expected. If what I suspect is true, though, young Harry had just saved us from compulsion by sirens in more places than London.”

Rufus nodded. “I believe so, yes, Elder. If he had been in London, I don’t think the image would have been necessary. He could simply have sung on the bank of the Thames, and that would have worked.”

Juniper half-closed his eyes. “It seems that some form of celebration is in order for our phoenix-voiced young savior.”

Rufus concealed a chuckle. If Juniper thought to use Harry for a political purpose, he would quickly find out how much of a subordinate Harry refused to be.

But it might do the magical world good to be reminded of what they owed Harry. Negative articles had started appearing again, as the reporters recovered from the shock of learning what wizards had done to house elves. Most of them charged that Harry had done more stunts than actual, solid moves for the public good. Dionysus

Hornblower had decided that he was too powerful this week, and those copies of the Vox Populi were selling very well.

“Tell me what kind of festival you had in mind,” he told the Elder.

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Harry glared at Falco as the older wizard flew away. He was somewhat disappointed that he hadn't been able to settle the contest here and now, but he didn't think he could have. He had thrown more magic than he had thought into that contest with the siren queen and the memory Falco had summoned to torment him. His muscles trembled and ached, and his throat felt as if someone had looped it with bands of hot iron. Magical exhaustion stalked the edges of his vision, making it blur.

He still managed to jump and whirl around when someone touched his shoulder, of course.

Draco stared at him worriedly, before grabbing and crushing him in a hug. Harry braced himself to be scolded. The barriers he had put around the Great Hall must have fallen when he pulled all his strength into himself to fight, but he had put them up in the first place. Draco wouldn't have liked being separated from him.

“Are you all right?” Draco whispered.

Wary—when would the scolding appear?—Harry nodded against his shoulder. He touched his throat and shook his head when Draco glanced at him expectantly. Draco smiled. Harry had the impulse to take a step back from him. Where is the Draco who would yell at me?

"I'm not surprised, with how much effort you put into the song," he murmured, and kissed Harry's forehead. He glanced up as other footsteps sounded outside the Forbidden Forest, then turned back to Harry. "That was the most beautiful music I've ever heard," he whispered.

Harry smiled, uneasily.

Draco's arms tightened around him, and his head came up like an antelope scenting the wind—or a fox, Harry supposed. "And don't worry," he said. "We are going to have that chance you talked about showing me if I'd changed enough on the vernal equinox." His hand caressed the back of Harry's neck. "It was a holiday, right?"

Harry nodded again.

"Good." Draco rubbed his cheek against Harry's before he dragged him around to face the rapidly approaching professors. "We deserve it, you and I, after everything we've done in the past week."

With Draco standing beside him, Harry thought, and sounding like that, he could believe the holiday might actually happen.

Content in the knowledge that he had someone else to fight for him, he leaned his head on Draco's shoulder and waited for the inevitable crowd who couldn't accept the idea that this was just something a vates did.

Chapter Seventy-Seven: Wound in Song and Crowned in Flowers

Draco felt hostile to the whole world as he stood there with Harry in his arms. Well, at least potentially hostile to the whole world. Anyone who would try to take Harry away from him and insist that he make some speech or answer questions counted.

He'd heard the sirens' song less as music and more as a simple pull towards open sky and open land and open water, at least until Harry had begun singing back to them. Then he'd listened to the conversation swaying back and forth, a thread of silvery argument countered by the golden reason of the phoenix song. He'd not known he would be able to follow it so well, or that the songs would twine around each other in a tight net that tugged him on to the right conclusions. Harry was persuading the sirens to leave, and they were going to leave, at least if he could show them visions that charmed them enough to do so.

Then he'd heard the voices, the voices of Harry and his mother, overlaid on the conversation as though they were standing in front of the lake where the sirens sang.

It had been—a memory Harry hadn't shared with him. Or he had and Draco had forgotten about it. Either way, it had felt like the shock of hearing it for the first time. It certainly explained some things that Draco had often wondered about, including how Harry could be so bloody reluctant to take a lover.

And it infuriated him that so many people got to hear something so private about Harry, almost as much as it did to look around the Great Hall and realize how many of the expressions were ones of pity.

He'd raced everyone else outside when the wards fell, to insure that he got to Harry first. And now, as Harry leaned his head on his shoulder and briefly succumbed to his nearness, Draco felt it had all been worth it.

The next moment, though, McGonagall appeared in a gap of the trees, and Harry stood straight and pulled away from Draco. Draco had to content himself with running his hands over Harry's shoulder

while the Headmistress asked anxious questions about the presence of the sirens and the safety of the school.

Harry wrote his answer on the air in the same letters of fire that he'd used when he refused to speak to Draco for two days. The sirens came at Falco's command. He's become a Dark Lord, and he was using the same technique that Voldemort did to control them a few years ago. I drove them away, but Falco escaped before I could do anything about him.

All stripped down, Draco thought, very neat and simple. He wasn't surprised when the Headmistress frowned and asked, "And what about the voices that we heard, Harry? You and—" She glanced over her shoulder at the curious students and professors appearing behind her. "Your mother."

Harry's face turned so pale that Draco grabbed his arm, afraid that he would faint on the spot. He must not have realized other people could hear that, Draco thought grimly. He would have wanted to keep it private, and now his privacy was splattered across the air for everyone to see.

It made Draco dream of seeking Falco out and possessing him, then forcing him to flay himself. Surely that was possible. Making someone commit suicide with possession was possible. So this ought to be.

Once again, though, Harry refused to give in to whatever temporary weakness he might be feeling. That was a weapon Falco used against me, Headmistress. Not intentional.

"He was trying to make you become distracted and give him the upper hand in the battle?" McGonagall asked, her eyes sympathetic.

Draco thought he was the only one who noticed Harry's slight hesitation before his flesh hand moved to trace the letters in the air. Well, Snape, who hovered at McGonagall's shoulder and stared at Harry as if he were never going to let him go again, and was only prevented by Harry's age from picking him up and carrying him to bed, might have noticed, too.

Yes, Headmistress.

McGonagall sighed. "Such are the ways of Dark Lords." She turned around and nodded to the students behind her. "You are all quite safe, and the vates is uninjured," she announced. "Back to your breakfasts, if you please."

Of course, no one pleased. They crowded around Harry, asking questions, staring in fascination at his throat as if they couldn't believe that a song so clean and spontaneous and pure had come welling out of it. Harry endured it all, more polite than Draco could have been. It probably helped that he couldn't speak, and his letters on the air only answered one question at a time, so he could pretend to ignore those he found too uncomfortable.

Snape made his way to Harry's side as soon as possible, his hand falling heavily on Harry's shoulder. Harry nodded to him and cleaved close. What the Headmistress's sternness hadn't been able to accomplish, the Potions Master's scowl did. Snape successfully won Harry free of the crowd and led him inside.

Draco followed slowly, thoughtfully, never letting Harry out of his sight, but thinking a number of thoughts that were quite unusual for him. Harry would be honored for this; even if no one else had seen the struggle or heard the song, the children at Hogwarts would write to their parents.

Now, for the first time, Draco thought he was seeing why Harry didn't want to be. He had not looked triumphant when Draco came to fetch him, but simply exhausted. For a few moments, at least, he had sagged as if he hurt, as if his legs were unable to support him.

Perhaps, no matter how great the achievement, having the celebration right after it isn't a good idea.

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Harry wanted to brood.

It wasn't—it didn't hurt that much, to have a memory splayed across the ears of those inside Hogwarts—and further away, for all he knew. He could bear it. He could survive it. He had survived having people see worse during the trial.

But he wanted an hour, even just a few minutes, to curl himself up inside a little shell of pain, and wrap the memories around a core that he understood, that other people didn't dictate to him. The core wouldn't have self-pity in it. It would have complete understanding. Because he was the only person who completely understood himself, after all.

Just a few minutes alone...

But it appeared he wasn't to have that. First it was Snape remaining beside him as they went back into the Great Hall, hovering until Harry sat down, and then watching until he ate his first bite. Harry ducked his head, a dull flush mantling his cheeks. He could understand the reason Snape wanted to watch him—he had nearly vanished from life, in one way—but surely all the people peering from the other tables and watching him act paternal would embarrass him?

They didn't seem to. Indeed, Snape leaned closer to him and said quietly, "See that you do not forget you have a father here, if you wish to lean on him," before stalking back to the Head Table. And Harry knew that Millicent, sitting on one side of him, and Draco, come to sit on the other side, had heard.

Then it was Connor coming over, to hug him and exclaim about his nearly having lost the battle and how strange it had been, to feel his own limbs deadening and turning inside out with fear and delight as he listened to Harry and the sirens talk to each other. Harry returned the hug one-armed; Draco was holding his other hand in something like a death grip.

Then it was Argutus, come slithering over to demand to know why he'd been left out of all the fun, and then it was a large gray owl, descending magnificently towards the table, carrying an envelope with the official Ministry seal. Harry ripped open the seal with his flesh

hand, leaving Draco to hold the silver, and scanned the letter that lay inside somewhat desperately.

Dear Harry:

A great many people saw your struggle with the sirens in the air over London. Though it means that the Obliviators will be busy working amongst the Muggles, it was an important reminder for our world of what we owe you. Will you consent to having a small ceremony held in front of the Ministry of Magic tomorrow, to honor your valiant sacrifice? We would not keep you long, but it is important, we think, to reassure those who watched that you managed to survive the battle without harm, and that you remain in the wizarding world as a deterrent to threats, and the champion of the magical creatures.

Sincerely,

Rufus Scrimgeour.

Draco took the letter from him and read it when Harry offered it in silence. His voice was soft and very pleased, thick as cream. "That's good news, Harry, isn't it? You get to remind them of what's actually at stake, and at the same time get a reward for your good behavior." He sniffed. "Time that you actually had something of your own, I think, rather than political concessions that any right-thinking wizard should have granted immediately."

Harry managed to smile. It wasn't so long ago that you were opposed to some of those political concessions, he teased. He kept the letters small, so that Draco was the only one who could see all of them. Does that mean you've changed your mind? Or was Draco Malfoy one of those wizards who miraculously remain right, no matter which side they're on?

Draco had the grace to look embarrassed. Then he put his nose up and said, "This is the Draco Malfoy who's your lover, Harry, and very proud of you." He leaned closer, so that his nose ruffled Harry's hair, and whispered, "And who's making sure we will still have that holiday."

Harry shot him a grateful look. Draco, occupied in reading the letter over again, didn't notice. Then he sat back and started offering suggestions for what Harry should write in his return letter, only half of which, if any, Harry actually felt compelled to use.

He complained silently to himself in his head, then took a deep breath and started writing. So he wouldn't get time to brood. That didn't matter. The day had to go on, and he was sure that he would be stared at in classes and the corridors. Well, why not? He'd done a great thing, hadn't he?

The notion that he hadn't remained in the middle of him, gnawing. And gnawed, and gnawed, and gnawed, all the way through Potions while Snape's eyes rested on him, through Defense Against the Dark Arts where people craned their necks back to give him awed and excited looks, through Transfiguration where some of the Ravenclaws who'd once made plans to track him with a special spell seemed poised to take notes on which miracles could come out of his hands.

I didn't do it to impress anyone, Harry thought, when he heard someone whisper something about that, snickering. He thought it was one of the seventh-year Slytherins. Of course, they had a right to be less than impressed with him, since they lived in the same common room with him and saw him trip over chair legs and slump asleep on the couches with a train of drool running down his face. But, likewise, they should have known him well enough by now to realize he would never do something like this as a—as a—

As a Gilderoy Lockhart stunt, really.

I just did it because I had to. And that's it. People are heroes all the time because they have to be, and no one gives them festivals for it, or stares at them in the Hogwarts corridors and whispers behind their hands.

I'm sick of it. I wish it would go away.

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“Thank you for coming here today, Harry.” Scrimgeour was using a Sonorus charm, so that the rest of the crowd who spilled, shoving and pushing, into the narrow little alleyway could hear him. “This festival in your honor is a small thing, the least of what you should have, but we wished to see you honored as close as possible to the day of the actual battle. It would not do for us to forget.”

I wish you had, Harry thought. He simply nodded; it was still hard for him to talk. That appeared to be enough to content the crowd, which applauded and cheered wildly. They were in the same place where Harry had held his press conference last Midwinter, to warn everyone in the wizarding world that the wild Dark was attacking. It was extensively warded against Muggles seeing anything, and an image of them floated above the alley, showing, like the Sonorus charm, what happened for those who stood near the back. Harry didn't think his face had stopped flaming since he arrived.

“A small festival” still meant the Ministry did stupid things. There were reporters everywhere, most of them calling out excitedly for the smallest quote from Harry, and with cameras snapping in his face every time he forgot himself and glanced to one side. Garlands of flowers, magically forced into blooming early—or actually brought from other countries, for all Harry knew—lapped the posts and railings of the small platform Scrimgeour had constructed, and an Auror had come forward with another crown for Harry the moment he joined the Minister. Harry had to restrain the urge to rip it off and throw it into the crowd. They were blue flowers, with long thorns that seemed in danger of poking him in the eye whenever he moved.

Draco stood beside him on the platform, his arms looped together around Harry's waist, his face deeply content. Snape was just behind him, armed with a scowl that kept most of the reporters from trying to photograph him. Harry had wanted Connor to come with them, too, but his brother had refused, saying he'd had enough of celebrations in his name to last him a lifetime. The only ones he wanted now were the parties that came after he'd won the Quidditch Cup for Gryffindor.

Besides Scrimgeour, a few members of the Wizengamot were on the platform: Griselda Marchbanks, looking stiffly proud, and Elder Juniper, a man Harry hadn't met before. He said little, but from the

long and keen looks that he directed at his face, Harry suspected he was a good politician. The Minister had said, with a small shrug when Harry asked him, that the festival had been mostly Juniper's idea, but he had agreed with it because he thought the wizarding world should be reminded of what they owed Harry.

What they owe me, Harry thought, as he gloomily surveyed the cheering crowd, most of whom probably saw no more than a blurry image, is an hour to let me rest by myself and just think.

It hadn't happened yesterday. Draco hadn't left him alone all day, including falling asleep in his arms with a smile that seemed to have permanently marked his lips. Harry had thought he would lie awake and do his brooding, but his magical exhaustion—which he refused to go see Madam Pomfrey for, in the only battle he won that day—and the warmth of Draco so close had sent him spiraling into sleep far sooner than he'd meant to go. And then he'd awakened today and had to come to the Ministry for this stupid ceremony.

The Many snake, looped around his throat because Harry had felt like bringing her, stirred, reflecting his agitation. Harry wished he could raise a hand to touch her without attracting instant attention; as it was, he hissed softly to her under the cheering, calming her down. Parseltongue didn't hurt his throat as much as English still did. He felt her coils slowly shift into a state of relaxation, and the soft flick as her hood and tongue worked to touch his throat.

"Your fame as a vates," Scrimgeour said, when the applause had died down enough that people could hear him, "has justifiably won you the nods of the righteous before now, but the regard of the relatively few." Harry didn't miss the glance he sent sideways at Juniper when he said that last, and filed it away for future reference. "And yet, you have freed the southern goblins, freed the northern goblins, freed the centaur herd of the Forbidden Forest, freed the unicorn herd of the Forbidden Forest, released a Many hive from its web, freed the Dementors, survived two flights with dragons, negotiated a settlement for the werewolves so that they might begin to enjoy the same rights as wizards, and freed a house elf who was then able to show the rest of us how we have gone wrong. That is an

impressive toll of achievement for a task begun—how long ago now, vates?” He turned courteously towards Harry and waited.

Harry held up three fingers. His throat still burned like hot iron when he spoke. Swallowing made it only slightly better. But then, luckily, he wasn’t required to make some sort of speech at this mad ceremony.

He wondered for a moment why Scrimgeour hadn’t just summarized his accomplishments as vates, something along the line of “freed many species.” Then he grimaced in resignation. That wouldn’t have fulfilled Scrimgeour’s purpose, which was to remind the people watching and listening, the people who loved him right now, exactly how much he’d done and gone unacknowledged for. But still, Harry thought, nearly rubbing his forehead with one hand before he realized how such a gesture would be interpreted and stopped, he could have lumped a few of them together. The centaurs and the unicorns and the Many hive and the Runespoors, which not many people knew about, had all lived in the Forbidden Forest. He could have made just one pithy statement about that, and been done with it.

Merlin, his head hurt.

“Three years,” said Scrimgeour, his voice proud and ringing. “How many of us could have done so much in three years, even if we thought to begin respecting the rights of magical creatures in the first place?” More applause, of a kind which made Harry’s teeth ache. “And now you have the sirens to add to that list, Harry. Truly, a most impressive accomplishment. Wizarding Britain would still be much more a country of slaves than it is if not for you.”

He paused for some remark from Harry. And perhaps Harry could even have forced one out. He should have said something about how Britain would still be a country of slaves until Muggleborns were free and enjoyed equal rights, perhaps, or until all house elves were free of their webs, or until someone could walk down the street and not receive sidelong stares—an allusion to Jacinth, and the other children who might be like her, and a way to begin building support for them.

Perhaps it was just as well that he didn’t say that last, he thought, as he met Scrimgeour’s eyes, given the volatile relationship he had with

the press, and his dislike of being stared at for becoming Voldemort's magical heir, never mind everything that had happened since then.

"You have saved my own life several times over," Scrimgeour said, evidently deciding Harry would not respond. I love my sore throat, Harry thought sardonically. It saves me all the trouble of coming up with an excuse not to say something. "And the lives of so many here. I do not know how many were on the verge of jumping into the Thames when the sirens sang—"

Embarrassed laughter welled up from the crowd.

"But I can testify that I was in tears when the phoenix song sounded." Scrimgeour inclined his head to Harry, his face gone grave and respectful. Harry knew he should admire the man's political instincts that let him travel from a matter of laughter to a matter for sorrow so quickly. He just wished he would stop talking and go away, though. "That is another thing we should not forget, vates, that you saved us from the wild Dark and that a phoenix loved you enough to give up his life for you. We heard your voice once, on the morning when the rebellion ended and we were able to give werewolves something like the rights they needed." Juniper snorted, and Harry thought he knew which issue the Elder and the Minister parted company over. "To hear it again is a gift for our time, an unearned reward."

Harry just nodded, while his face flamed so hot that it felt as if he were getting a fever. Does he have to keep doing this? I don't want people staring at me. There are other things to stare at, genuine wonders like phoenixes and sirens that share the world with you and which you never look at. And Fawkes didn't die because he loved me. He died because, without his death, the wild Dark would have taken me and taken the world. That's heroism. Sacrifice. Not just another part of my story.

"Given all this, and the other things you have done for us, including your victories in the war against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, we see fit to present you with a small token of the Ministry's appreciation." Scrimgeour smiled slightly. Harry was sure that many would take that smile as ironic. This close, he could see the deep sadness in the Minister's eyes, and he suspected that his next words

were true. "It is all that we can give, other than our hands and our minds, to support the same cause that you have supported, and truly, though the hands and minds come closer to making up our debt, neither is enough."

Harry closed his eyes. His head was spinning, and he felt nauseated. Merlin damn you, Scrimgeour, you've done more than enough. You've used all the power of your office for my sake, and taken risks that you shouldn't have taken if you wanted to remain a popular Minister. Why do you have to do this, too? It's not right, and it's not fair.

"The Order of Merlin," Scrimgeour continued. "Elder Juniper has asked to be the one who presents it to you, and I can only agree to his request."

Harry snapped his eyes open. No.

The Order of Merlin was mostly reserved for those who did valiant deeds in war; it had been awarded posthumously to several members of the Order of the Phoenix, including Gideon and Fabian Prewett, after the First War. It could also serve as a reward when an ordinary citizen did something heroic, like capturing a fugitive, in a way that went above and beyond the call of duty.

Harry hadn't done anything like that. He'd freed the sirens, for their sake and not the sake of the wizarding community, and he had suffered through a memory he hadn't been anxious to relive, since it would remind the entire wizarding world he was an abused child. And he hadn't managed to defeat or capture Falco, which would have turned yesterday into a real victory.

He made brightly colored letters appear in the air in front of Scrimgeour, shining like lightning. With all due respect, Minister, I can't accept this.

Scrimgeour frowned slightly. "Why not, Harry?"

I haven't done enough to merit it.

Draco gave him a little shake, and hissed in his ear, “Harry!” Snape moved a stride forward, but Harry couldn’t turn to see his face and didn’t know what he was thinking. Griselda and Juniper frowned. But Harry’s eyes were locked on the Minister, whose face was thoughtful, but melting into a gentle smile.

"I assure you, Harry," he said, "that you have." And he nodded to Juniper, who moved forward to pin the medal on him.

Harry looked straight into the Elder's eyes. It didn't take Legilimency to read the emotions there. Juniper felt sorry for him, and that, along with the desire to see what kind of political opponent Harry made, was what had caused him to come on the platform and award the Order of Merlin.

It was too much. Harry felt his self-control break and fall in pieces like rotten wood. He drew back with a long hiss, and the Many snake reared around his throat and swayed threateningly towards Elder Juniper. Thanks to the image duplicating them in the sky, many saw that.

“Harry!” Draco gasped.

Juniper stepped back out of harm's reach, but his face had gone guarded, his eyes dark. Harry was viciously glad that he had at least lost the traces of pity he had shown.

“Harry, what is the meaning of this?” Scrimgeour said, and his voice was gentle, disappointed, and far too understanding.

They would not understand his real reasons, none of them. And he'd already disappointed everyone and ruined an important political moment that, Draco would say, could have been used to do other people a world of good. So no one should much mind if he did something even more offensive.

Harry shoved Draco's arms away from him, calmed the Many snake with a tiny hiss, and Disapparated.

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Draco didn't have to ask where Harry was. While everyone else on the platform acted as if Harry's disappearance was the work of Voldemort, he knew. When the Minister had, in embarrassment, to cancel the festival and have Elder Juniper take the Order of Merlin away—he had seemed deaf to Draco's promise to hold onto it for Harry—he stood there in silence, feeling his anger build, because he knew. And when Snape took him back to Hogwarts and went to search the dungeons, Draco went directly to the Slytherin common room and climbed the stairs to their bedroom, because he knew.

Disappointment and anger struggled in him, but the anger was steadily winning. Why couldn't he just accept this? Those feelings of unworthiness and embarrassment could have been suppressed just a little longer. He deserves those honors, and more, and even if he doesn't think he does, then he could let us think he does, and give them to him. And having his Many snake attack a Wizengamot Elder!

He wasn't sure if Harry had gone a bit mad, or simply couldn't stand the thought of a medal—which would count as a bit mad, in Draco's opinion—but the simple truth of this was that Harry had set back his political relationships. Draco had ears, and he could listen to what the crowd was murmuring behind him before they Apparated, and what Juniper had said to Scrimgeour before they left the platform. A few were shocked at Harry's attitude. Many more were prepared to think him ungrateful, or pitied him because he was an abused child and they supposed the reminder might have been too much for him.

All that Draco could think, as he opened the unlocked, unwarded door and stepped inside, was that Harry had better have a damn good explanation for this.

He paused when he entered. A large, dark shape that looked something like a beehive, but hummed with magic, occupied the bed. Draco gave it a sharp glare. At last he worked out it was a layered cocoon of wards, and that Harry was inside it. Probably brooding, he thought, or building himself up to an unreasonable rage.

On the table near the door sat a Pensieve. Draco walked slowly towards it. It was the Pensieve Harry had given him for Christmas,

filled with memories that let him understand Harry's mindset at the time they were happening. Draco hadn't worked through all of them. He always rejoiced when he finally understood something strange Harry had done or said, but too many of the memories made him sick with rage and hatred to view more than two or three an afternoon.

The silver liquid in the Pensieve trembled now above the brim, as though something new had been added. Draco knew the exact usual level of the liquid. He'd stared at it often enough, lying awake in the morning with Harry in his arms, the only time he got to watch Harry sleeping without Harry knowing he was doing it.

He cast one more glance at the beehive, and verified he wasn't getting in without suddenly turning into a Lord-level wizard. He reached out and plunged his head into the liquid of the Pensieve.

The world turned around, and then he was standing on the platform and watching Harry listen to Scrimgeour's speech.

This time, though, he could hear and experience Harry's thoughts.

Draco stared. Harry's thoughts were angry, irritated, and resentful, but almost none of them had to do with feeling himself unworthy of the Order of Merlin. Most of them came from not having had enough time to put his head to rights as regarded the memory Falco had shown the rest of the world. No one had left him alone long enough for him to do it.

Oh, Harry, Draco thought, as he watched Harry's agitation climb and climb, until the moment came when the Order of Merlin was offered and Harry did turn into the paths of thinking that common heroism happened all the time and wasn't acknowledged, so he didn't see why his should be. If you didn't want to go to the festival, you should have said so. Scrimgeour would have accepted it, I'm sure. And if he hadn't, then never mind. Why didn't you say so?

He knew the answer almost at once, of course, because this memory enveloped him in Harry's point-of-view. Harry knew it was a political bridge-building opportunity, and he didn't feel able to refuse it. And he understood Scrimgeour's purposes, and viewed the Minister as an

ally. If it made him uncomfortable and embarrassed, that was a small price to pay for earning visibility and notoriety that might benefit the house elves' cause, or someone else's cause, at some point in the future.

Except that, this time, it had been too high a price. Harry had needed more time to hide and brood alone—though Draco wished he did not think he had to work through his thoughts about the memory alone—and this time his temper had splintered before the demands made on it. He hadn't thought of the fact that he was a Lord-level wizard, and could keep others waiting on his pleasure, if he desired it. No one would object. They might be angry or frustrated, but they would remember Harry's magic and what he had done for them, and calm down.

He does hate disappointing people.

Draco pushed a little further at the memory, wondering if Harry hadn't slept well last night, and that was the cause of his tiredness. He smiled a bit when he realized his own presence had lulled Harry to sleep long before he was ready.

No, he realized a moment later. Falco had used the memory as a web, trying to coax Harry into surrendering to it, and Harry had yearned to do so. And the guilt and the discomfort of that were mixed up with his efforts to find some sort of peace with the fact that now most of the British wizarding world knew about his old determination not to have a family or a spouse.

Shit.

And he hadn't told them about that, of course, because—

Because he was Harry.

Draco came slowly out of the memory, shaking his head, two resolves like iron blades in his mind. One was that he couldn't be angry with Harry, because Harry needed him too much for things like watching his back in a political situation. Draco kept priding himself on his perception and his keener instincts for what Harry could do, did

he? Then he should have been able to realize Harry's mounting anger was more a result of emotional exhaustion than simple discomfort with the notion of being celebrated, and insisted that everyone wait a day.

The second was that they both needed that holiday, and he was going to make sure Harry took it.

He looked over at the bed just as the wards collapsed into each other and Harry came out, shaking his head like a cat rising from water. His expression was calmer than it had been since Draco first saw him after the siren battle. He'd brooded, then, and confronted his pain, and probably tucked it into some private corner.

He faced Draco, and waited. It took Draco a moment to realize he was waiting for a scolding.

How he thinks I could, after having seen that memory—

But perhaps Harry hadn't expected him to check the Pensieve.

He moved forward, wrapping his arms around his boyfriend and kissing him softly. Harry lifted both his arms in self-defense and made a low, confused sound in his throat, which he grimaced about a moment later.

"Your throat still sore?" Draco asked quietly.

Harry, head on one side as if wondering what the trick was, nodded.

"Then you should go to Madam Pomfrey," said Draco, slinging an arm around his shoulder and tugging him to his feet. "And after that, we'll go to the Headmistress. I'll do the talking, if you like."

Harry sighed noiselessly, and the letters appeared on the air. About the festival I ran away from?

"About our holiday," said Draco. "Both of us need it, you as much as me, and I won't let it be put off any longer."

Harry actually stumbled for a moment. Then he glanced sideways, a glance that turned into a full-on stare, and new letters appeared, erasing the old. You're not angry at me?

"Not when you share like that," Draco said, with a nod to the Pensieve, and caught Harry's eye. "Not when you trust me so much, the way that you would never have trusted me just a year ago."

Harry, still hesitant, still looking as if he believed this new situation would reverse at any moment, put his arms around Draco. They stood there like that for a moment, breathing.

Draco kissed the top of Harry's head, and glared at the wall, imagining any enemy who might try to stop them from vanishing together for a few days. He needs me just as much as I need him.

Anyone who tries to get to him this weekend is going to have to pass through not just his wards, but every trick I can put in place.

Interlude: The Liberator's Eighth Letter

March 23rd, 1997

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

Though you have probably already heard this, Falco Parkinson has Declared for the Dark.

I do not think he has any real idea of what he is doing. My dreams come clearer and clearer to me now, and in them he has the most ridiculous pitying look on his face as he listens to the instruction of the Dark. (I think he would have been happier to be a Light Lord, but he seems hardly likely to listen to me). He believes it will not catch him in the end. He thinks he is smarter than it is because he has fooled it for six hundred years. He does not dream of its delayed vengeance—

My pardons, Minister, for the long scratch of ink across the parchment at this point. My mother came in and grasped my wrist, pulling me to my feet, and stained the letter. Luckily, she did not look down to see what I was writing. I have made sure to write bad poetry on plenty of occasions, so my parents think now that that is what I write all the time.

She called me a fool, hissing it at me, close to my ear. I trembled, for I did not know what I had done wrong. As it turned out, she was angry about something my elder sister had done—or perhaps Harry. The rages burn and blend in her until I cannot tell their source. I can only tell that I am their most frequent target.

She nearly broke my wrist before she let me go.

I need to leave this house.

I still do not (quite) dare tell you where I am or who I am, Minister. My father knows when a letter leaves the house or enters it with his name in it, even anagrams of his name. And I still—perhaps it is unworthy of me, considering all they have done, but I would like to leave my family with an intact reputation if at all possible. They have

done a great deal of talking about aiding Falco Parkinson, but they have not actually accomplished anything. They are harmless.

Except to me.

But, to finish with my chatter about Falco Parkinson. He does not dream the Dark might take delayed vengeance. He does plan to attack on Walpurgis, when the power of the wild Dark is at its height. Insofar as that falls out, he is intelligent.

I do not think he can win. But if my warning might make the battle easier for Harry or spare a life, then I will send it.

My growth is diminished and haunted here, and I am a shell of the person I could be, I should be. Harry's visions of freedom have inspired my own. In the end, I think, I must leave this house and take my chances in an outside world where I have no friends, no shelter to call my own—

And I inflict this on you in what is not meant to be a personal letter, Minister. My apologies.

Yours,

The Liberator.

Chapter Seventy-Eight: Three Hours

“Why on earth you didn’t come to me immediately, young man, I will never know...”

Harry half-closed his eyes, taking comfort in the way Madam Pomfrey bustled around him, looking up the spells and fetching the potion she would need to soothe his throat. She’d told him bluntly that his magical exhaustion from yesterday had combined with the ache in his throat from singing, and that was the reason he felt as if he were being stabbed with hot wires every time he tried to speak. It would take magical means to heal it, unless Harry wanted to go without speaking for two weeks or more, to give the magical part of his fatigue time to fade.

Harry hadn’t thought that would be so bad, but Draco’s gaze, even and keen and piercing, had kept him from admitting anything of the kind.

But Draco had ducked out now, with a murmur about using the loo, and Madam Pomfrey talked to Harry exactly as she would have talked to any other student who had taken a reckless risk with his health—half-angry and half-worried, muttering under her breath as she flipped pages and practiced incantations, or uttered a small “Ah!” when she realized she remembered the spell. There was no different, special treatment for him because of who he was. He was simply Harry, a rather stubborn and awkward boy who insisted on making his life more stubborn and awkward.

“Here you are, Harry.”

She held out a vial of green potion to him, soothing in both color and smell. Harry recognized it as the Moly Draught, created to heal internal spell damage. He swallowed obediently, and sighed; though the taste was nothing to brag about, the sheer thickness and coolness of the liquid helped.

“Now lie back and lie still,” Madam Pomfrey directed, and Harry reclined against the pillows. He listened to the incantations she cast, and recognized the purpose of most of them from his mad dash

Draco was not actually in the loo, but he had raced into it to relieve himself before he went to do the rest of his tasks, so he did not consider it lying.

He'd contacted Professor Snape with the phoenix song spell first, and told him, as simply and directly as he could, what had happened to Harry and why he'd run away from the ceremony. Snape had listened in silence, and agreed without pause to Draco's suggestion that he and Harry take a holiday, and not take too long about it, either, in case someone delayed Harry out of sheer good will—or Harry decided to delay himself because he couldn't just go away like that.

Then Draco spoke to the Headmistress. She was more reserved, but when Draco related the tale of what had happened at the ceremony to award the Order of Merlin, she sighed.

"I suspect Mr. Pott—that is, our vates does need surroundings Hogwarts cannot provide him," she murmured. "You may leave for the weekend, Mr. Malfoy, with the understanding that you are to make up your schoolwork, and that you are not to trade my indulgence for special favors in the future. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Headmistress," Draco said submissively, and fought to keep from snorting. Of course it's clear. Does she really think I'm stupid enough to let her find out I'm skiving off, even if I were?

The next thing he did was settle down with a piece of parchment, ink, and a quill, and compose a letter. He didn't think Harry would let him send it. It could serve as a model of the one he thought Harry should write, though.

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

This is a formal apology for the scene I made on exiting the award ceremony this afternoon. I beg your indulgence, as I was suddenly overcome by emotions built up from the duel with the sirens, and afraid of causing more harm if I remained. Circumstances similar to the trial of my parents applied, as you yourself were able to see when Falco displayed one of my memories. I will be out of reach for the

next few days, but I did wish to send this owl and explain my side of the story.

Draco thought for a moment, then added below that, I will be happy to accept the Order of Merlin in private, and offer a likewise private apology to Elder Juniper of the Wizengamot. Harry would hate that, but Draco thought it was necessary after the debacle Harry had made at the ceremony. For one thing, he didn't want to make a political enemy of Juniper, whom Draco was hearing more and more about lately.

He indulged himself completely by signing the letter Harry Malfoy, and then turned it around to admire it.

Harry opened the door of their bedroom just then, at the same moment as red letters sprang to life in front of Draco. There you are, Draco. What are you doing?

Draco turned around and fixed a stern eye on Harry. He was, potentially, caught off-guard and doing something he should be ashamed of, writing Harry's political correspondence for him. But he was only that way if he allowed himself to be. What he wanted to be, what he would be, was completely in control of the situation and assuring that Harry got his holiday whether he wanted it right now or not. "Giving you an example to follow," he said, and held the letter out.

Harry read it. Draco knew the exact moment when he reached the part about the Order of Merlin; his brow, clear until that point, furrowed, and he jerked his head up with a soundless hiss.

"You have to," Draco said insistently, leaning forward, never relinquishing Harry's gaze. "I understand your memory, Harry, but part of the reason you reacted so strongly was that you hadn't had time to let your emotions go. Now you have. And now's your chance to prove that your thoughts about your unwillingness to take the reward really are just remnants of your training, which you can overcome with some thought. Unless they aren't, of course," he added, sharpening his voice to a needle. "And then I think we'll need to talk, and include Snape and Joseph in the conversation."

Harry glanced away from him.

“You deserve it,” Draco continued remorselessly. “You do, Harry.” He saw Harry’s face start flaming as it had at the ceremony; this time, he hoped, only embarrassment was behind the blush, and not anger. “If you try to convince me you don’t, you’ll have to explain why.”

You know why.

“Temporary feelings of unworthiness, yes. And since they were temporary, they’re gone now,” said Draco. It wasn’t an easy thing, to ignore Harry’s glare, but since it needed to be done, he did it.

I don’t like it.

“Now you sound like you’re whining.”

Writing doesn’t have a sound.

“Splitting hairs, Harry?” It wasn’t so hard to hold his gaze, now. Harry was wrong and he knew it. Draco liked arguing with people in that state. He stood up and took a step forward. “This is unworthy of you, all of it—both blaming your training when we all know it’s just modesty, and then acting like a sulky child. You’re an adult, Harry, and part of being an adult means owning up to your actions. You don’t just get to shoulder all the delicious guilt and leave the praise behind. Accept it, now.”

Harry clenched his flesh hand around the silver one, and a brief wind of magic rippled the bedcurtains. Draco didn’t back down. He knew—had known since the Presence of War, if not before that—that Harry would never hurt him.

At last, Harry’s fingers loosened, letting the parchment drift free. He sighed and glared at Draco. All right. But I’m going to write the letter. And I’m not signing myself with a last name.

Draco smirked. He did think he’d manage to change Harry’s mind on that, someday, too, but that was for the future. He’d wanted two victories today. One was making Harry accept the Order of Merlin.

The second was now.

“I’d hurry and write it if I were you,” he told Harry casually. “Since we’re leaving for our holiday three hours from now, and you’ll need to accomplish everything you want to between now and then.”

Harry stepped back from him with a speed that was comic, and his writing turned yellow and acquired several exclamation marks. Then he shook his head, and new letters appeared. Three hours isn’t enough time, Draco.

“Make it be.”

Harry frowned.

“You did say that you wanted to spend the holiday with me.” Draco took a step forward, and ideas flashed past him more rapidly, lending him an air of the same kind he’d had when he confronted Lucius. Though he hadn’t thought about it before, he knew where Harry would have taken him; suspicions coalesced too rapidly into certainty for him to trace the path. “At Copley-by-the-Sea.”

How did you know that?

Harry’s eyes were gratifyingly wide, and Draco gave a casual shrug. “Never you mind. The point is, you wanted to go. Are you changing your mind now?”

No. That is. Harry stopped his writing as though he had to consider, hard, what he was about to say. That didn’t bother Draco. It only ate into Harry’s time, after all, and not anything else. He leaned back against the desk, folded his arms, and gave Harry a stare that grew longer as he waited.

I didn’t expect such a short length of time, Harry said at last. The werewolves aren’t in Copley-by-the-Sea any more, since they’ve chosen a new pack leader and gone either to Woodhouse or back into wizarding society—

“They chose a new pack leader?” Draco hated the surprise dripping from his voice, since this was a situation where he’d wanted to remain completely in control, but he had shown it, and now there was no way of taking it back.

Harry raised his eyebrows at him. Yes. Camellia finally admitted that they needed more of me than I can give them. She offered to bite me, but I couldn’t do that, especially not to Snape. So they chose her as leader, and though they’re still welcome in the Black houses for sanctuary if they need them, they’re living elsewhere. I think that relieves Regulus, Harry added, with a slight smile on his face. He thought constantly of all the treasures and traps in the houses that could stab anyone who’s not actually linked to the legacy of his family.

“You didn’t tell me about the pack,” Draco said.

I was sure I had. Harry shrugged. Sorry?

That was another thing that would have to change, Draco thought determinedly. If he was going to spend as much time and devotion on Harry as he wanted, he would demand equal time and devotion, and push Harry for it, until sharing things Draco wanted to hear became second nature. Certainly the fact that he’d left that memory of this afternoon in the Pensieve was a step in the right direction. Draco could coax Harry further, could make him see that he wanted to let Draco in.

This holiday would be the perfect chance to do that.

“So we’re going to Copley-by-the-Sea,” Draco said. “And no one else is going to disturb us there, so you should tell your brother farewell, and write the letter to Scrimgeour. I’m not sure what else you need to do, but you should do it.” He waved his wand, murmuring, “Pack,” and his own clothes and treasures began to jump obediently into his trunk.

It’s too short, Harry said, sliding the letters like an envelope under Draco’s nose so that he couldn’t pretend not to see them. Give me a little more time.

Draco looked up at him, and smiled pleasantly. "No," he said. "Both Snape and the Headmistress already know, and you have their permission. Besides, you don't have the best record of making decisions today. I want to go on holiday, and I've already arranged matters. So there," he added.

Harry's face darkened. You're a spoiled brat with no sense of shame.

"And at a time like this, how fine a thing that is," Draco drawled, while he gathered up their blankets with another wave of his wand. They were probably cleaner and less dusty than anything at Copley-by-the-Sea, and he wanted to sleep in comfort; he had no intention of making himself deliberately uncomfortable on what was supposed to be a holiday. He looked up and raised his eyebrows. "Are you still just standing there and scowling at me? It must be two hours and fifty minutes, by now."

Harry stiffly stuck out a hand, and the air next to him flared and turned into a representation of a clock. Harry glanced at it, sighed, and then gathered up parchment and ink and sat down to write his letter.

Smug, Draco turned back to his packing. He had, of course, no right to indulge himself in a fit of temper if Harry didn't. Harry could have argued that he wanted more time, and if he'd done it strenuously enough, then Draco would have given in.

But then, he could have asked for more time before he attended the ceremony the Ministry held, too.

He'll learn to stick up for himself, even if I have to lie in his path like a log in order for him to do it.

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Harry watched as Hedwig flew away with his letter to Scrimgeour, and sighed. He'd made his writing less purely apologetic than he wanted to, and he'd also written in a sentence about accepting the Order of Merlin. The cause of both had been Draco watching over his

shoulder, and now and then making a “tch” sound with his tongue between his teeth when Harry seemed about to sign the letter.

He turned around to make his way to Gryffindor Tower, and started. Connor was standing in the doorway of the Owlery, watching him with a faint, fond smile on his face.

“Some fighter you are,” he said. “I followed you all the way up here, and you didn’t even notice.”

Harry frowned a little. If that were true, he would have to work on that. Perhaps he should look for a spell that would increase his sensory alertness. It wouldn’t do to have enemies sneak up on him on the field of battle.

Connor rolled his eyes and came over to hug him. “You’re leaving for holiday, aren’t you?” he murmured into Harry’s neck. “The Headmistress told me. She seemed convinced you were departing right away, and she didn’t want me to worry.”

I wouldn’t go without saying farewell, Harry said, positioning the letters behind his shoulder so Connor could see them. Unless we were having an argument, or it was a matter of life and death.

Connor laughed into his neck. “You take everything so seriously, Harry. Maybe a few days alone with Draco will teach you how to laugh once more. You knew how for a while, and it’s slipped again.”

Harry stirred restlessly. This holiday was supposed to be a reward for him, and it’s turned into—

“What?”

Harry waved his silver hand vaguely, unable to find the words. He would have been even if he could speak.

“You have a lover who thinks of you and tries his best to make sure that you’re happy, not just indulging him,” Connor mocked, pulling away. “How sad, Harry. I’m sure most people in your situation would be whimpering and begging to escape.”

Since when did Draco become your hero? You didn't used to think so much of him.

"Since I changed my mind about things in general, and realized I have to be an adult and no one will make it go away." Connor caught his chin and tilted his head up. "Think of it as a corresponding turn to the one you've made, Harry," he added. "I've learned to be more adult, and so has Draco, and so has Snape, if he'd ever admit he wasn't perfect before. And now you've learned how to be a child again. You've had the bad effects today, exploding in public like that." Harry looked at him warily, but Connor didn't seem inclined to scold. "So now you get to experience the better side of it, which is being taken care of. I ought to be an expert on that, don't you think?"

It feels like going to the Sanctuary, even if I won't be gone so long. I just know that things will explode in my absence.

"So let them explode," said Connor. "We can get some practice picking up the pieces, and I think that will be good for all of us." He hugged Harry abruptly, and so hard that Harry wheezed when he let him go. "You won't always be there for every crisis," he said, gripping Harry's shoulders nearly as hard as he'd hugged him. "You weren't there during the First War, even if you did end it, and they survived without you. You have the right to this, Harry. Go." He gave him a little push towards the top of the Owlery stairs.

Harry went, occasionally glancing over his shoulder. Connor, it seemed, hadn't come to send a letter, but just to play with Godric. At his whistle, the black eagle-owl came down to his arm and landed, careful not to dig his talons in too far, but ducking his head to nuzzle and nip at Connor's free hand. Harry heard his brother laugh, a sound he hadn't heard in too long.

I should spend more time with him, too. But not because it's an obligation, or because I want Parvati to think well of me. Just because I want to, and because I want to hear him laugh again.

The clock floated up against his shoulder, nudging at it. Harry glanced at it, and sighed. He had very little time left in the three hours Draco'd given him; writing the letter had taken longer than he thought.

He hurried off to fetch Argutus, now and then calling his name in Parseltongue. The Omen snake still wandered the castle fairly often, and hadn't wanted to go to some boring ceremony the way the Many snake had.

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Rufus read over Harry's letter a few times, to make sure he understood all the nuances of tone. Then he firecalled Elder Juniper, sitting back in his chair near the office hearth while he read the letter one more time. Percy had come up and hovered gently near his shoulder until Rufus let him see it. His own face expressed more honest doubt than Rufus felt able to show.

“Do you really think that he’ll keep his promise, sir?” he asked. “After the way he embarrassed you earlier?”

“That wasn’t deliberate, to look at this.” Rufus stroked the parchment.
“And yes, I think he will.”

The fire flared, and Juniper strolled into sight. Rufus nodded to him. "I have an apology from Harry vates here, if you'd like to see it," he said, holding it out. "And an offer to accept the Order of Merlin and apologize to you in person."

Juniper didn't even look at the letter. "I expected no less of such an honorable young man," he said. "Tell me, Minister, if the choice came down to supporting Harry or supporting the Ministry, what would you choose?"

Rufus narrowed his eyes. Juniper could intimidate him as few other people could, but that did not mean he was allowed to get away with cowing this blatant. “The Ministry, of course,” he said coldly. “I believe I have already demonstrated that sufficiently. I did not support Harry’s rebellion. I took control of the Ministry with the Ritual of Cincinnatus

only when I believed that I had no other choice, given the rebellion of my own Department Heads against me.”

Juniper stared at him then, looking him directly in the eye, and nodded. “You are right,” he said. “You are loyal to the Ministry, and always have been. My apologies.”

The fire flared, and he vanished. Rufus sat back and rattled the parchment in his hand, intent eyes on the flames.

“Sir?” Percy asked from behind him.

“Hmmm?” Rufus asked. His mind raced with visions of why Juniper might have been so abrupt with him, when just yesterday they had watched the vision of Harry battling the sirens and shared some of the same emotions. He was coming up with a limited number of allies Juniper could both have and be willing to risk offending the Minister for. He hoped he was wrong on his guesses.

“Why did Harry do what he did? The real, political reason? In your opinion, of course, sir,” Percy added hastily.

“I do believe what he wrote in the letter.” Rufus smoothed the parchment out again and attempted to ignore his speeding heartbeat. “That he had a bad moment, and erupted. That’s all. He has no reason to lie about something like that, and if he could have put a better face on it, he would have.”

“But that’s—” Percy shook his head and fell silent.

“Worrisome in a political figure, yes.” Rufus was tempted to continue, to remind Percy that Harry had never been a conventional political figure, but he held his tongue. Harry had been effective because he could still be so gathered and so calm so young, because he had much to offer his allies that no other single person could duplicate. It was indeed a bad sign if, when the pressure began to increase, their vates lost his temper and became slightly more human.

On a personal level, Rufus was relieved Harry was acknowledging his abuse and acting more like a human being. But he didn't usually deal with Harry on a personal level.

Hold firm and hold fast, Harry, he thought, gaze going to the last few lines of the letter, the ones that talked about a holiday. If a holiday is what you need, then take it. We require you too badly to let you explode simply because you wish to.

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"You're sure about this." Juniper's eyes were dark, both because that was their natural color and because of the emotions thronging them. They fastened on her; he was leaning against the hearth of his main welcoming room, sipping carefully at the wine his house elves had brought them. Juniper was an old Light traditionalist. While he might listen to the arguments against keeping house elves carefully, he was not going to let them go simply because of a bit of pretty rhetoric and sentimental reasoning.

"Sure." Aurora Whitestag leaned back in her chair and lifted her chin. She had worn her most formal robes, precisely because of that old Light traditionalism. Once, a host had been able to demand that his guests wear colors indicating their allegiance, though that custom had fallen into disuse long ago. Aurora had chosen pale blue robes, the color of an undeclared witch. Juniper would appreciate the gesture, even as he knew she used it in hopes of manipulating him. But that she was willing to make the gesture at all, no matter what her motivations for making it, showed her as someone he could, potentially, work with.

Juniper nodded several times, slow jerks of his head that Aurora knew had sometimes made his political enemies think him senile. Those political enemies weren't influential any more. Those weren't drowsy motions, those were the motions of a wading bird spearing fish, or opponents. "He does seem more like a child and less like a young man, in the face of gestures like this," he murmured.

"That is the contradiction of our vates." Aurora leaned forward earnestly. "He was too adult at first, but with the revelation of his

abuse, the cracks come clear. There are times when he will act as if he had every difficult area of his past mastered, and then he stumbles as he has here. That was one of the main purposes I attempted to accomplish with the monitoring board: giving him advisers who could watch for such stumbles and prevent them from being too catastrophic.”

“That is not the way it happened,” Juniper murmured, watching her.

Aurora shook her head. “I lost sight of my purpose, and did not recruit the right allies.”

“And why should I think that you will have any better success now?” Juniper took a moody gulp of wine.

“Because I am working with you,” said Aurora honestly. “Because you can keep me on track, and because you can recruit Light allies who wouldn’t listen to me. Understand, I would not be the controlling or guiding force this time. That would be you, Elder.”

“You are eager to surrender power, then.”

Aurora shrugged. “What is done with power matters more to me than the degree of it I personally possess, Elder. If I am in a position where I can influence the future course of the British wizarding world, but at the same time not expose myself to fighting that I’m not good at, nor open attempts at manipulation I also lack the skill for, then I will be content.”

She was silent, awaiting his decision. She had been the one to approach him, after all, not the other way around, moving immediately after the debacle in front of the Ministry. This was the kind of slip she had feared Harry would make, and she was determined that he not drag Britain down with him. Juniper, potentially personally offended by the mistake, would make a good ally.

“Your proposal has merit,” Juniper said at last, setting his wineglass down. “The trick will be not to depend too much on the young man’s

psychology. It is key to understanding him, but even that can fall afoul of his determined protectors and the laws that account for Lord-level wizards.” He arched an eyebrow at her. “This time, Mrs. Whitestag, I am determined to have a way to work with our vates that is not, in the finer points, illegal.”

“Understood,” said Aurora, and felt gratitude and relief wash over her. I may yet hope to help save our world, and this time working with someone who has more political acumen than I do.

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Harry shook his head as they appeared with a bump in Cobley-by-the-Sea; Regulus had given them a Portkey, so as not to have to drop the house’s wards. Harry had told him he thought they were perfectly safe in Cornwall, let alone in a Black house. Regulus had given him a flat look, and Harry, unsure what had caused his friend’s dark mood, had not asked further.

Regulus had sent them to the bedroom they would probably want to use, Harry saw, as he looked around. The bed was large, and already stripped of dusty hangings, so that Draco could spread out the sheets and blankets he’d taken from their bedroom in Slytherin. Regulus had probably come and stripped the bed himself. Harry licked his lips, feeling an uncomfortable frisson of humility.

Argutus nudged him under the chin. “You are being very silly,” he informed Harry loftily. “I am going to explore, and see what has changed since last time we were here.” He slithered down from Harry’s shoulder, and Harry charmed the door open so that he could make his way into the hallway.

“Here we are.”

Harry moved out of the way so that Draco could put his trunk against the wall, and watched in amusement as Draco began to unpack it. Draco sometimes seemed incapable of staying anywhere for a single night without making it look as much like a home as possible.

Then Draco glanced at him over his shoulder. “I think the mirror I gave you for Christmas would look nice on that wall, Harry,” he said, nodding to the one on Harry’s right.

Harry froze for a moment. He kept the mirror tucked away. It made him deeply uncomfortable, and he couldn’t see much practical use for it. And if Draco was alone with him here—which was certainly the case; he could feel the wards whispering to him about the absence of other wizards in the house—then the main thing for the glass to show would be their reflections. Harry didn’t mind looking at Draco’s. He didn’t know that he wanted Draco looking at his.

But Draco’s eyes held a distinct challenge. They were alone here. Harry didn’t need to worry about anyone wandering into the bedroom and exclaiming about what they’d chosen to decorate it with, at least for a few days. And if he was committed to sharing himself with Draco, if this was private time together, hiding secrets Draco mostly already knew about made no sense.

He turned away and began to unpack, taking out most of the gifts he’d received at Christmas and on various other holidays, and which he mostly kept tucked away. Draco’s mirror he hung on the right wall, and Draco almost instantly moved a table that sat next to the bed under it and placed on the table the Pensieve Harry had given him. Harry leaned his Firebolt against the wall, next to the wooden carving of many animals Peter had given him for Christmas last year, once he’d unshrunk it. He Transfigured a shelf for their books, while Draco was hanging the Slytherin curtains around their bed and sometimes cursing at the rods under his breath.

They were done in a much shorter time than Harry had expected. Looking around, he gave another little shiver. The room also looked more like home than he had thought it would.

Where is home?

Harry was somewhat disturbed to realize he didn’t know the answer to that question. He could think of Malfoy Manor as home in some contexts, and Hogwarts, perhaps most closely. But his mind shied from the thought of applying the word to Lux Aeterna or Godric’s

Hollow any more, and he still considered the Black houses Regulus's property, to be used if he needed them, but not lived in—not by him. And other places he had stayed in or seen, like the Sanctuary, of course couldn't qualify.

He bit his lip thoughtfully, and then Draco murmured in his ear, "What did you have planned for this holiday, Harry?"

He turned around. Draco was watching him, hands folded beneath his chin as if his head were resting on a desk, but for once making no attempt to touch him.

Harry cleared his throat, then winced as it sent a prompt pulse of burning through his mouth. He'd carefully packed the Moly Draught, and he looked forward to the next dose he could take of it. He turned to his writing, and reminded himself that no one else was here, no one else could see, and that Draco wasn't likely to think he was writing anything particularly ridiculous.

I wanted to show you what I see when I look at you. Everything I see when I look at you. So we would have discussions and debates about the Grand Unified Theory, and I could give you lessons that would help you further along the road to achieving your Animagus form. Except that you did that by yourself, of course. He shot Draco a swift grin, which didn't change Draco's level, calm gaze at all. And I wanted to watch the hippocampi with you, and sleep in during mornings when we didn't have anything else to do, and tell you why and how I appreciate you. And perhaps have arguments about what I didn't appreciate, of course. And, um.

He couldn't write the word. Draco followed his gesture to the bed, though, and gave him a dazzling smile for one moment.

"Well. Not too far from what I planned, then." He stepped forward and lowered his voice. "Listen, Harry. There's no reason that we can't still do that, given how much I like to be spoiled—"

Harry felt his own face brighten.

“Except that it’ll work for both of us.” Draco cocked his head. “So you tell me things about yourself, too, and I tell you what I appreciate, and, at least once, you lie back in the bed and just let me do whatever I wish with you. You’ve given me gifts like that several times, after the Rosier attack and after that disastrous meeting with the monitoring board. I’ve never been able to just give you a gift, though. The closest was Midwinter, but you disobeyed me and moved around.”

Harry’s face hurt from his blush. He didn’t move, though, when Draco caught his eye and held it.

“Will you agree to that?” he asked.

Harry let out a slow breath. No one else is here. And Draco’s hardly about to turn around and use this against me. And if it’s a weakness to be petted and spoiled on occasion—well, that’s what I wanted to do to Draco. It wouldn’t make him weak, would it? So it shouldn’t make me weak.

He gave back a hesitant nod.

Draco’s face softened in a way Harry hadn’t seen before, though he didn’t smile. He reached out and caught Harry’s hand.

“Come on,” he said, tugging him towards the door of their bedroom. “Let’s go watch the hippocampi.”

Chapter Seventy-Nine: A Dream of Spring

Harry wondered if they could have achieved this peace and perfection in any other season.

Draco stood beside him as they watched the hippocampi through the transparent rock separating them from the sea, his hands resting flat as though he wanted to brush his fingers against the fins of the water-horses swimming by. Harry had to divide his attention as he leaned with his own shoulder on the rock, his eyes now and then on the darting herd, now and then on Draco's face.

He knew Draco had looked at the tadfoals and the mares before, but he must not have been with him. Or he didn't remember enough about it from those heady days at the end of summer when he'd been trying to negotiate with the pack and the Ministry and learn about Falco's threat for the first time.

Or he simply hadn't seen Draco change enough then to appreciate what a difference this made.

Draco's eyes half-closed now and then, as though the magical light reflected through the rock were too strong for him. His fingers opened and closed in small instinctive motions that imitated the foals' swimming. His face had shadows on it; Harry sometimes decided they were the shadows cast from his nose and mouth, and sometimes believed they were the lines of good and evil that Draco had learned to make real in the intervening months. A strand of blond hair became crushed between him and the rock as he leaned close, blue light filtering over his skin, staring at the ring-game the tadfoals had started.

The herd appeared entirely unconscious of the humans watching them, and Harry saw no reason they should be informed. Their manes floated behind them, uncoiling like whips, then jerked towards their necks again when they made a sudden movement. Their tails lashed harder and faster, columns of smooth muscle beside which even the tails of sirens looked weak and powerless. Their eyes shone like an Antipodean Opaleye's, and their skin was blue, was green, was some changing color in the light of magic and the ocean. Harry

watched as a mother hippocampus turned upside-down to better shield a very young foal from a harsh current, and felt an emotion move through him, deep and slow. It took him a moment to recognize contentment.

“And the Blacks really didn’t breed them?” Draco whispered.

Harry shook his head. The mother and foal had flipped back over and were swimming in circles now, the mare patiently spreading her tail when necessary to shield, but dropping it more and more, so that her child could feel the full force of the water. Harry watched the foal’s webbed hooves open and close like gills, learning the Atlantic carefully, as if he walked on top of jagged stones. That’s what I asked Regulus at first. But he said they came here on their own. Just some magical creatures doing what wizards don’t want them to do, he added, and hoped Draco could read the pride that had slipped into his writing. Not that he’d had anything to do with bringing the hippocampi here, of course, but he thought, as a vates, he was allowed to be happy that some magical creatures did not obey the iron wills of his own kind.

“They’re beautiful,” Draco murmured.

Harry cocked his head, hearing something in his voice, and slid his own shoulder along the glassy rock until he stood next to Draco. This time, he was the one to put his arms around Draco’s waist, returning the gesture that was more usual the other way. More beautiful free than any other way?

Draco nodded in distraction, and then blinked and glanced at him. “Wait. What do you mean by that?”

Would you find them as beautiful if they were bound by a web?

A click of the tongue, the same “tch” noise that Draco had made when he’d written the letter, and then he turned to face Harry completely. “We came here to enjoy ourselves, not argue,” he said.

We can do both at once. Harry regarded Draco as best as he could from so close and with Draco’s breath almost fogging up his glasses.

No one says that all arguments have to be screaming matches. Some of them are spirited intellectual debates.

Draco snorted and was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "I do hope that you've remembered to have your Hogsmeade owls direct deliveries of food here."

Harry recognized the distraction technique for what it was, but felt more than prepared to accept it. Arguments could be part of this holiday, Draco's conviction notwithstanding, but there was no reason to make them the whole. If Draco wanted to wait to talk about it, they would wait to talk about it. Harry still wanted to spoil him.

Better.

The light from the sea put strange shadows on Draco's face as he turned completely away from the hippocampi. "Better? What do you mean, better? You didn't have that much time to arrange matters when we came to Cobley-by-the-Sea."

Harry chuckled at him, though the first trickle of actual sound from his throat hurt badly, and anyway Draco gripped his arm to make him stop. I know. But I've been practicing, too. I knew that you probably wouldn't want to eat food from the shops, and of course I won't want to eat food from a house elf.

"What did you do, Harry?" Draco looked torn between wonder and wariness. Given what else had sometimes happened when he sprang a surprise, Harry really couldn't blame him.

For an answer, he asked, What sweet would you want to have right now, if you could have anything in the world? Answer honestly.

He watched Draco's eyes, and caught a slight widening, but none of the darting or flicking off to the side that would have meant he was making up an answer to the question. Instead, Draco simply said, "A Chocolate Implosion."

Harry looked polite incomprehension at him, and Draco's cheeks flushed a faint pink.

“It, um. It’s a sweet that the house elves made for me a few times before my mother realized that I’d invented it and forbade them to ever make it again. It starts out as a chocolate cake, but it’s scooped out and filled with just pure liquid chocolate, not cake. Then the cake top is put back on, and decorated with chocolate-covered cherries. And then another layer of pure chocolate.” By now, Draco’s cheeks shone like the sunrise. It was the most embarrassed Harry had seen him in months. “My mother made me study magical tooth care, too, for a solid week. She was so angry.”

So it’s been years since you’ve had it?

Draco nodded, and looked torn between hope and horror as Harry stretched out his flesh hand, pointing towards a carved stone chair. Harry took a deep breath and unspooled his magic, forcing it not through the narrow channels that a Transfiguration spell would normally have taken, but through an image of pure desire and will backed by Draco’s words. Sweat sprang out on his forehead. It was tiring, especially since he had a tendency to think of Transfiguration as the Animagus transformation now and start trying to use the techniques that Peter had taught him.

But he persevered, and the chair shimmered and slowly began to collapse inward, turning the brown of rich, life-giving dirt on the way. Harry yanked his imagination away from dirt when the chair began to smell like soil, though. Carefully, he filtered more and more of his magic into physical substance. Now he had to ignore the warnings in his own head about doing so. If he used so much power on this, then he wouldn’t be ready to defend himself if battle came—

But battle was not going to come. He and Draco were on holiday, and he had said that he wanted to do this for Draco, so he was doing this for Draco. He spun and forced and imagined. The part he had to expend the most imagination on was the chocolate-covered cherries; he’d never tasted them, so he went mostly with the taste of pure chocolate mingled with what little he could remember of the fruit and hoped for the best.

He was panting, a little, gasping, by the time it was done, but he'd finished it. He stepped back and surveyed his creation.

The Transfigured chair resembled nothing so much as a chocolate cake in several layers, with those layers trembling precariously on top of the rest. Small cherries, some showing smears of red under the chocolate, peeked here and there like eyes. Harry could smell it, too, so overwhelmingly sweet that he wasn't surprised Narcissa had discovered what the house elves were up to and made Draco stop.

He turned to look at Draco, only to find Draco staring at him.

"How could you do that?" he demanded.

Harry's first impulse was to see the demand as anger and worry that he'd done something wrong, somehow ruined Draco's childhood memory. Then he reminded himself sternly that the mere existence of a cake like the one Draco described couldn't ruin anyone's memory, and it was far more likely that he was just surprised.

I've been working hard on Transfiguration, he said simply.

Draco stared at him a moment more. Then Harry saw his whole body trembling, apparently with the suppression of the impulse to run over to the Chocolate Implosion and start eating it right away. He suppressed a smile of his own.

Draco seized his face and kissed him as if he couldn't get enough, opening Harry's mouth in moments with his tongue, holding him still as he ferociously licked and bit. Harry returned as good as he received, and Draco broke away from him in a moment, looking half-dazed and deliriously happy.

"I am so much in your debt, Harry," he said. "I don't suppose you could Summon plates and knives?"

Harry did so from the kitchen's cupboards, more amused than anything else. He did make sure to write on the air, Not in my debt, Draco. I wanted to do this for you. Spoiling you, remember?

Draco only looked happier. Once the knives and plates had arrived, he approached the Chocolate Implosion with the air of a hunter stalking a savage beast. Harry muffled his laughter and followed.

“You won’t believe how good this is until you taste it, Harry,” Draco whispered, half-reverently. “You really won’t.” And then he stared at the cake as if he were trying to figure out where to start first.

Harry watched the light gleam off his creation, and hoped it didn't taste like sawdust, and drank down Draco's smile like fine wine.

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Draco decided the best time to do it was in the early morning, before Harry was properly awake, and therefore before he could decide that something was wrong and get nervous or irritated.

Only, it turned out to be mid-morning, nearly ten-o'clock, because he had to sleep off the massive feast of the Chocolate Implosion the night before.

No one's perfect.

But he would like to make Harry feel he was, Draco thought, propping himself up on his elbow and staring down at Harry, who was still wound in the sheets of their bed and deeply asleep. His mouth was open, and he breathed through that and not his nose, with a little whistling sound. Now and then he turned over, though he usually turned back immediately. As it was, he made a tiny amount of progress towards the left side of the bed each time, and might eventually roll over if it weren't for the fact that he'd be waking up before then, and Draco's guarding eye.

Draco leaned over and gently pressed his lips to Harry's, waking him. Harry blinked and returned the kiss with interest, then hissed something in Parseltongue. Argutus, asleep on one of their trunks, hissed back, and he and Harry conducted what sounded like a casual conversation and not an argument to Draco. Of course, he could be mistaken. Sometimes half the hissing sounded angry.

He waited until it was done, then murmured, "What did he say?" into Harry's ear.

Harry started to answer, but a yawn interrupted. Draco found himself smiling a phenomenally silly smile as he watched Harry wrinkle his nose and curl his lips, before he brought one hand up to politely hide it.

"He said—" Harry shook his head in annoyance, and resorted to writing, though he strung the letters in a row above his chest and face so that Draco didn't need to turn his head. I asked where he'd been. He told me about the sweetness of the insects and rats he caught in the walls, and said that I couldn't have had something as sweet for dinner. I told him about the cake, but he latched on to the name I gave it—it sounds different in Parseltongue, implosion, you know, like shedding skin?—and won't believe that it was good.

"Just a lazy, silly, early-morning argument," Draco murmured.

"Hmmm." Harry stretched his arms and arched his back, unselfconscious in a way Draco had barely seen him act in their bedroom. Draco's eyes slid greedily up and down his body, but were stopped by the sheets. Well. They'd had sex last night, and right now he wanted to offer Harry something else.

"I have something not as silly to show you," he told him, and planted a kiss behind Harry's ear. "Share it with me?"

Something in his voice must have warned Harry. He paused in the middle of his stretch, and rolled his head over until his gaze locked with Draco's. Draco Malfoy, what are you doing? his writing demanded.

"Something wonderful," said Draco, and used his most enigmatic smile and brightest eyes until Harry gave in.

All right.

"Good, Harry," Draco breathed, emboldened by the trust on his face, and rose to fetch the mirror from the wall.

He brought it back half-concealed in his hand, but Harry saw it, or knew it from the feeling of the magic, and sat up almost at once. Draco stopped and held it out, making Harry look, and not moving forward when Harry's eyes widened.

I'm not sure what you want to do, Harry wrote at last, the letters growing thorns and snaps and flourishes over his head, the thorns pointing at his heart. But you're slightly mad if you believe that I'll think this is wonderful.

"It is, though, Harry." Draco made sure to remove all blame from his voice, and wondered if Harry knew that he responded to that croon by slightly rolling his head to the side, baring his throat. "I promise. I won't force you to accept this. I simply want us to look at you together so that I can tell you what I see."

You could do that without the mirror. I know what you think I look like.

Draco wondered where he had acquired the patience to coax Harry into this instead of rushing him. "And yet that's been easy enough to avoid in the months since Christmas, hasn't it? This is a holiday, where I want to spoil you. This would count as spoiling you."

Harry was silent, watching him, brow furrowed.

I know how to do this now. And he did. Draco pitched his voice low, the way he would speak to a wild unicorn, assuming that one ever approached him. "Harry, I believe that you have the courage to do this. I saw that in your face when you went up into the Midwinter storm." Harry shivered, but wasn't inclined to break the spell of his voice for the mere mention of Fawkes, and that encouraged Draco. He had to take some chances, risk making some mistakes. "I know how strong you are, how far you've come. I know that you don't need to face your reflection in the mirror in the same way or for the same reasons that you had to face your parents. You'll survive without considering yourself beautiful. But I want you to live, not just survive. And I really think this will make your life better, not just content me. Will you let me show you the glass and tell you what I want to tell you? Please?"

He could only wait, then, because Harry's face had gone smooth and blank and he had no idea which way the balance would tilt. He had to wait while Harry's right hand opened and closed on the blankets beside him. The silver hand flexed a little, too. The heel of the palm had turned almost flesh-colored now, and Draco didn't think the movements were all born of magic. The hand was starting to connect with Harry's body.

He waited.

At last, Harry ducked his head and gave a kind of nervous nod.

"You're sure?" Draco demanded.

Again, a nod, and this time it was accompanied by a glare and one of the lynx-like hisses.

Happily, Draco clambered onto the bed beside Harry and picked up his right hand, claspng it around the mirror. He leaned towards the glass, and watched as the ordinary appearance of Harry's face flashed, rippled, and grew more beautiful. Harry, as expected, stiffened, because he wasn't used to seeing himself Transfigured like that, as if he were a stained glass-window with the sun shining through it.

Draco leaned over his shoulder and kissed his cheek, and began to talk in a low, gentle tone.

"You grew into your magic, Harry, in a way that I don't think anyone else could have. You fascinated me from our very first meeting on the Hogwarts Express, when I knew that you would be in Slytherin, but if it had only been a matter of magic, I think I would have grown bored and gone on eventually, the way you were always waiting for me to do. It was more than that. I think I sensed, even then, that you had potential to become a great wizard."

Liar. Harry's words wrote themselves over the glass, somewhat obscuring his reflection. Draco didn't think that was an accident. You cared about power then, mostly.

“Not just power,” Draco corrected, mildly surprised. He doesn’t think Lucius taught me better than that? “I had seen people who had power. My father sometimes had friends over to the Manor, and my mother, too. Some of them were magically powerful wizards who made my father look small. And there was Professor Snape; I knew he was stronger than Father. But though Father respected them, and taught me to respect them, that wasn’t the only quality you could judge someone on. And he had something, and Mother had something, that none of them did. You have it, though.” Draco rubbed his cheek against Harry’s hair, delighted to feel him relaxing a little against him.

What is that?

“Strength. The ability to go on surviving, enduring, and making the best of what you had. People who can only function in one particular environment—the dueling room, say—don’t do very well. You have to be able to change quickly on the battlefield, survive.”

I refuse to believe you knew I could do that. I didn’t know I could do that.

Draco raised his eyebrows, and leaned nearer, breathing on the letters that covered the mirror, scattering them. “You did. Didn’t Lily teach you to use whatever weapons you could find against an enemy? You did that a few months after I met you, on the Quidditch Pitch against the Lestranges. You used some spells, but you also used the Bludger, and you used the Slytherin team to protect your brother in a way you couldn’t have if you’d refused the position as Seeker.”

Harry was silent, and wordless. Draco licked his lips. He was, essentially, repeating a lesson Lucius had taught him the summer before he left for Hogwarts, but he had to put it in his own words. And he wasn’t good with those. Someone could be listening, and he didn’t want to reveal weakness.

He reminded himself sharply that no one could overhear them here, and that many of Harry’s allies already considered him weak. That was one thing that he was here to change.

“There are wizards in the world who are powerful, Harry,” he whispered. “You respect them, but you can avoid them. Professor Snape is one of those people. And there are people who are both powerful and strong. You respect them, and you endeavor to be one of them, and you follow them if you can’t.

“And then there are people who are powerful, and strong, and mighty. That means they have this kind of wild beauty—“ Draco could feel his own blush steadily climbing “—that unites the other qualities and sends them flowing above their heads, flapping like a banner, calling other people to notice them. My father didn’t think might was something you could be born with, or even decide to develop. You had to climb to meet it, and it’s so tiring to live life at that level that most people never make it.”

Draco’s hand clamped down on his shoulder. “You’ve waved that banner for me, Harry. What’s more, you’ve taught me that it is possible to try to climb. If you fall on the way, you’ve still done more, tasted more of life, then all the people who are content to remain on flat ground their whole lives long. That’s one reason I love you, Harry. Because you’re wonderful, yes, but you’ve taught me to recognize the wonderful in myself.” He leaned his head alongside Harry’s neck and nodded at the beautiful reflection in the mirror. “And there’s the man who does that.”

Harry twisted around and kissed him almost desperately. Draco held himself back only long enough to insure that the mirror was safe on the bedside table, and then returned the kiss.

Harry’s eyes had a light in the back of them now, where there had been only shadows before. Draco had reached him. He might not believe it completely yet, but he believed something like it. That was good enough for right now.

Draco closed his eyes and let Harry bear him away.

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Harry stepped back and surveyed the table narrowly, then nodded. He hadn't had a chance to look at the book that described this ritual in a few weeks, since he'd first decided on the idea of a holiday with Draco and timing it to coincide with the spring equinox. But he thought it was still right. Those intense memorization skills Lily had trained into him had not faded completely.

He stepped back and looked at the door of the study with a faint smile. He'd sneaked away from the bedroom while Draco took a nap, more than slightly worn out from their activities earlier. And he'd managed to arrange the necessary components for the ritual before Draco awakened. From the sound of the hasty steps outside the study, though, his sleeping beauty was asleep no longer.

"Harry, what—"

Draco took a step into the room, and then his voice died. He stared blankly. Harry met his eyes and smiled more broadly. He held out a hand.

Draco descended the small flight of stairs into the study, eyes staring, face blazing.

Harry had decorated the walls with branches. A few of them were tapestries or paintings that he'd moved from other rooms, but more were conjured or illusions. All wrapped around each other to enclose the study in an endless wall of green. The sweet smell of pine needles filled the room, and laurel leaves, and here and there the scent of newly budded greenery that wouldn't open for a month or more without magic. Harry had used illusions for that part. They had learned to Transfigure food so it smelled good, but not other objects as yet.

Rushes carpeted the floor. Harry had learned how to Transfigure those, once he realized what a part of the ritual they were. Rushes had covered the floors of the places where Dark and Light wizards came together on the once-a-year meetings of reconciliation and trade that had, long ago, been common on the equinox. Harry was going to have rushes, even if it was a few days past the first day of spring.

The table had a soft glow enveloping it, shaped like a double-sided cone that narrowed from both ends as it neared the wood. One side was dark green, the other gold. They mingled into pale blue on the table itself. The colors of Dark and Light and the undeclared wizards; the book had made it plain that he must incorporate them somehow, and Harry had chosen this way.

And lining the table were sixteen candles, all alight, surrounding a seventeenth, mostly-built, candle in the center.

“Harry, what is this?” Draco asked, when he’d reached the bottom of the stairs and stood staring at the dark green cone of light, not knowing what to do.

This is an equinox ritual, Harry wrote, stepping towards him. I read up on it and adapted it. He nodded towards the candles. Those are for you. You’re not quite seventeen, so the final one isn’t lit yet. He smiled at Draco. We can light it on your birthday, if you’d like.

Draco tilted back his head to look at the branches. “And these?”

Greenery. New life. Harry kissed him. And a container, of sorts, for this spell. He stretched out his silver hand, and tested his voice. “Accio crystal ball!”

Draco looked as if he might laugh when the crystal ball rose from beside the table, where Harry had put it, and skidded across the floor to land in his hand. “Really, Harry, I know that you got an O at Divination, but—”

I told you I adapted the ritual, scribbled Harry, smiling at him. Once, it was used to arrange marriages between feuding families, and to predict the future of the marriage. This time, I’m going to use the crystal ball to show you what I hope for in your future. He breathed on the crystal ball, and held it up, letting Draco see within it. He was using a modified version of the spell Draco had invented to put memories with one’s mindset into a Pensieve. It had pleased Harry to work his own magic on his partner’s magic, as much as it pleased

him to come up with a ritual of their own in between the major joining rituals.

Draco stared as the magic formed into distinct images. The first was of the man they had both seen before, in a room at Hogwarts that foretold a possible future for both of them. This Draco was an adult, more relaxed, and they'd last seen him kissing Harry under some kind of a green canopy.

This one stood in front of a garden of red flowers, looking at them with quiet satisfaction. A jeweled fly buzzed over one of the flowers, and it lashed up and ate it. The Draco in the image chuckled. The real one looked startled.

I don't think you could ever invent something beautiful that wasn't also deadly, Harry told him.

"Harry—"

Draco wanted to say something, but the next image showed him entwined in a bed with Harry, and his eyebrows rose to his hairline. Harry flushed. He'd deliberately been more daring and more detailed than he usually allowed himself to be, and he was afraid it didn't look quite right as a result.

He shook his head. Draco was looking anything but disappointed. In fact, he made a low, pleased sound in his throat as he watched the figures in the bed shift.

Then the bed was gone, and Draco grimly dragged a wounded Harry off a battlefield of yellow sand, back into the shelter of red rock hills. He knelt over him briefly, received the imagined Harry's nod of reassurance, and then leaned around the cliff and cast a curse at their enemies. The green light of Avada Kedavra made him look even older, but also more dangerous, more determined, more decisive. All traces of softness and childishness had gone from his face; he was a man grown.

No matter what we come to, I know that you'll protect me, Harry told him.

Draco flew on a broom that might have been a Firebolt over a Pitch crowded with struggling players. He swerved above them all, and then let out a yelp of triumph as the Snitch smacked into his palm.

I think you could be a fine Seeker, if you wanted to, said Harry. But, of course, there were never fair tryouts.

Draco enchanted a clock to keep time and sing in a phoenix's voice, and was showered with money by a grateful witch who'd always wanted just that. He walked among the powerful, and they respected him in his own right, and not just for his family name or for being Harry's lover. He stood in Malfoy Manor and swore to uphold the ideals of his family while making them his own, so that he was not a copy of Lucius Malfoy, and the ancestors in the portraits stiffly nodded their approval.

Image after image after image, and Harry filled them with all the love and faith of which he was capable.

At last, they faded, and Draco said in a kind of choked voice, "They can't all be true."

Harry studied him, and smiled. Draco said that, but he wanted to believe they could all be true. He was so greedy of many different kinds of recognition and achievement that he would take them all and more.

I believe you have the capacity to achieve them, Harry wrote. Whether you do? Is a different question. There will be some you aren't interested in, and some that you would rather fulfill in different ways. He stepped forward and laid a hand on Draco's cheek, letting the crystal ball drift away. But I believe that you can do it.

And Draco kissed him.

Harry gasped. That was not part of what he'd had planned, not that he was complaining. He had planned a quiet meal and a long conversation to be held while he and Draco watched the hippocampi.

But Draco was clasping the back of his neck, tilting his head back, and whispering into his ear.

“I want you, Harry. Want you so badly right now. The gift of you. So that you’ll lie still and let me do whatever I want, spoil you however I like. Will you let me do that?”

And Harry could only close his eyes and whisper an acceptance.

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Draco took Harry back to their bedchamber. He’d felt a different succession of emotions in the last fifteen minutes: irritation and concern when he woke up without Harry, startlement at the state of the study, and then astonishment and shock and delight when Harry showed him that series of images he could become.

Now, he felt determination to make Harry share that delight, to shake with pleasure in the one realm he’d always seemed reluctant to take pleasure in.

He eased Harry back on the bed, kissing him deeply enough that Harry made a startled little sound against his lips, but didn’t try to pull away. He didn’t try to remove his own clothes, either, and Draco nodded approval as he took up his wand and murmured a spell to take them away. Harry really was surrendering, letting Draco do what he wanted.

And what Draco wanted to do right now was study Harry.

Harry opened and closed his hands in nervousness as Draco looked at him, but made no attempt to cover himself. Draco gave him another small nod. Just a few months ago, Harry had been too nervous when naked—and underwater, no less, so that Draco couldn’t get a good look at him—to stop shaking. Now, he looked torn between embarrassment and desire that Draco get on with it.

And Draco did.

But slowly.

He avoided the place on Harry's neck he already knew about, since he wanted to learn what other places would make Harry shake as if he were drunk, or gasp, or squirm with repressed longing to curl up, or thrust his hips. He ran his hands gently through Harry's hair, arranging it in different shapes and making Harry tilt his head back and forth and raise his shoulders, half-helplessly. He kissed his scar, which brought the strongest defensive reaction; Harry had to fight to hold still on the pillows. His magic jerked and tumbled about him when Draco located a spot on his shoulder blade that made his toes curl, and he gasped and gulped several times when Draco leaned in to play with his nipples as if they were toys.

He also blushed. Violently. Draco could feel the slight added heat to the skin as he let his hands glide over it, and smiled, amused. Well, he would see if he could make Harry forget all about his embarrassment in a moment.

He lay down gently next to Harry, arranging himself so that he could stroke Harry's shoulder and that tempting spot with one hand while he trailed the other lower and lower. He let it hover over Harry's groin until Harry made a tiny impatient noise, and then he slowly, slowly, clasped his cock.

Harry made a gasping sound and tried to hide his face in Draco's shirt.

"Harry?"

He felt the rasp of Harry's hair against his chin, and barely heard the whisper. "I just—it's too much—Draco, you've never—"

"I know. But you have." Draco kissed the back of his neck, and felt his skin jumping and shuddering with his heartbeat. "Hush, Harry. It's all right. You can take without giving, sometimes. And this is just as much spoiling for me as you. It's what I want." He stroked gently, one time, and Harry seemed undecided whether to breathe or moan. Another stroke, and his body made that decision for him; Draco thought it sounded as if the noise had begun in his feet.

He shifted himself, keeping Harry distracted with the steady and slow motion of his hand, and picked up his wand with the hand that until that point had rested on Harry's shoulder. He cast a spell Harry didn't notice, then added a time-delaying charm to it. That done, he moved down yet again, and very gently took Harry in his mouth.

Gasps and soft cries came from above him. Draco thought that only half of them were from pleasure. The other half came from Harry fighting himself, trying, as hard as he could, not to sit up and demand that Draco take something for himself, too. Sacrificial instincts, training against pleasure, Harry's constant worry that he would be too selfish—Draco knew it had many names.

He also didn't care about its source, not right now.

As slowly as he could bear, he licked at and around Harry, and kept one hand in place, stroking his hips and his balls and now and then his arse, building the level of pleasure slowly but steadily. Then he let the time-delayed charm go with a whispered word, at the same moment as he sucked and sucked hard.

Sudden pressure closed on the spot on Harry's neck that always made him tremble, the spot on his shoulder blade that had caused his toes to curl, his nipples, his scalp, and all the other sensitive places Draco had found. Some would feel like mouths, some like hard pinches, some like the mere touch of trailing fingers. But all of them were working at once to give Harry as much pleasure as he could feel.

Draco felt Harry lose the battle against what he would probably call his better self. He felt it with all five senses: the sight of Harry writhing in abandonment, for the first time, without a ritual of some kind to coax him into the right mood; the sound of him practically howling; the feel of sweetened skin tightening under his hands; the smell of steadily increasing musk; the taste in his mouth, not the most wonderful taste in the world, but making him feel smug and triumphant and loving.

He crawled back up Harry's side and kissed his forehead, slowly waking him from his daze. Harry blinked at him, and Draco rejoiced in the sight of his eyes.

All barriers down, finally, and it wasn't because of a damn ritual, or because he was so emotionally exhausted that he couldn't maintain them after a day of shrieking and crying and witnessing death and despair. Simply down because he was sated, and because he trusted Draco.

Harry said, with a tone in his voice that Draco had never heard, "Thank you."

If he had to give a name to the tone, Draco thought, kissing Harry's lips this time, he would call it dawning self-discovery, even wonder that something so simple and physical could feel so good. And no, it hadn't been a matter of life and death that Harry get over this bit of his training.

It had just been something Draco wanted to do.

He was so smugly pleased that he could ignore his own arousal for a few moments, at least until Harry suddenly shook himself like a seal rising from the ocean and wrote, My turn.

And his magic blazed around him, and his smile shone, and Draco felt joy break open in him like a spring of water, like a springing bound, like the rising season of spring.

This may be no more than a dream, he thought, as he lay back and let Harry kiss him senseless. Just a fleeting glimpse of what we can't ever have permanently. But dreams were meant to be enjoyed.

And we've sure as fuck earned this one.

Chapter Eighty: Realm of Night

Harry awoke slowly. He found his hand trembling as he reached out to pick up his glasses from the bedside table, and frowned. He and Draco had made it back safely to Hogwarts, and a week had passed since the vernal equinox that brought no crises, and he had had no nightmares. Why should he shake now?

Then he realized the room was cold, flowing and filled with a temperature more appropriate to winter than spring. Harry shivered and fought the urge to duck beneath the blankets. He had to find out what was happening.

He shifted, keeping Draco behind him so that his warmth would at least partly shield his partner from the chill, and then sat up. He saw the problem almost immediately, but he didn't recognize what it was until it shifted away from the glow of the silver strands of fog strung throughout the room and came towards him, with an eerie silence given the size of its hooves.

A cold tongue shot out to touch the scar on his forehead. The thestral bowed its head and rubbed its neck against him. Harry took a deep breath and ran his hands through the mane, which flowed over his fingers like twigs.

"What is it?" he murmured. The thestrals were the guardians of the Forbidden Forest. He supposed they might have come to alert him of a problem in the forest, but it seemed likelier they would have gone to Hagrid.

The horse stepped away from him, large wings flexing. It bowed its head, and Harry followed the gesture; so sleek and slim were the thestrals that he wasn't sure what it was pointing at at first. Then he saw that something other than silver fog coiled around its hoof, glowing blue.

Harry slid out of bed and knelt beside the thestral with a scowl he knew was grim. This web was solid and thicker than the others, a chain that grew more present as Harry gave it his full attention. When

he sat back, he could see that it was tangled around the thestral's wings and neck, over the eyes and the mane.

"You want to be free of the web?" he asked, his voice still a croak.

He wasn't sure how much English the thestrals could understand; Hagrid had trained them to pull the carriages, but that didn't necessarily mean they knew words beyond the simple commands that let them do so. And this thestral simply stood and looked at him expectantly, mane falling like a dark curlicue into its pale eyes.

I'll have to do it. Humans couldn't talk to any magical species they wanted, but phoenixes could. Or, at least, the only phoenix Harry had ever known had been able to, and that was the one whose voice he bore.

He sang softly, using as little magic as he could. For one thing, it would wake Draco up. For another, he really didn't want to exhaust his voice again just as it had recovered. He focused his attention on creating a vision of the web snapping within the thestral's mind; Fawkes had spoken to him in images, not words.

The thestral danced in excitement, and bobbed its head up and down like any ordinary horse, cold breath shivering from its nostrils. Harry blinked, and nodded, and stood. No magical species had approached him like this before, asking for freedom now, as opposed to entering negotiations, but there was a first time for everything, Harry thought. At one time, he would have thought it impossible that a karkadann would come from Africa to find him, too.

He laid one hand on the thestral's neck, and swung onto its back. The creature let out a tiny snort of satisfaction, and then turned and trotted towards the door of their bedroom. Harry frowned. How did it get in?

With magic, apparently. The thestral looked at the door, and Harry caught a faint glimpse of a shiny, slimy mind rolling over next to him, demanding that the barrier cease to exist because the thestral wanted it so. The door opened, and the thestral went out, its long, thin legs negotiating the steps down to the common room better than

Harry thought a centaur could have done. Now and then it hunched its shoulders to pass through a narrow gap; Harry ducked when it did.

The common room door opened the same way. In the wide dungeon corridors, the thestral began to trot, wings flagging up and down as if to hurry it forward. Harry could hear the click of its hooves now, from a distance, like dice made of bone. But no one opened the doors they hurried past, and then they were up the stairs into the entrance hall, and through the open doors and into the courtyard, and the thestral spread its wings.

Harry had only ridden one of the great horses once, in his fourth year soon after his freeing of Dobby, and he had forgotten how different the sensation was from sitting a broom. Glory thrilled through his muscles as they soared upward, and he could hear the wild Dark singing in the distance. Of course it was singing, it was near Walpurgis and it always sang then, but Harry thought sitting on a thestral's back made him peculiarly suited to hear it.

Something sparked in the air next to him, and then a black wolf paced the skies there, green eyes shining at him over the fur, a brilliant silver lightning bolt scar on its head. Harry nodded in wary greeting to the wild Dark. This was the form it had worn when it had tried to corrupt and seduce him after Bellatrix had cut off his hand.

The wolf only threw back its head and howled joyously, though, and Harry heard the howl as he had once heard Fawkes's voice, bringing him an image of what was to come. Many things change this night. We welcome a new comrade, and the Bony People go home.

"Bony People?" Harry asked, but the wolf turned and sped away, losing coherence in the dark spaces among the stars. Harry shook his head and faced forward again.

The thestral was circling over the Forbidden Forest now, which swarmed with strands of silvery fog like reflected moonlight. Harry could see the blue chains, too, which he knew connected the thestrals in long slave coffles. They all seemed to be moving towards a certain place in the center of the Forest, and he wasn't surprised

when the thestral he rode slanted down towards it, wings beating only every now and then as needed, to propel it forward.

They came down on a wide space of dead grass, fenced with black, bare trees. Just by looking at them, Harry doubted they would ever grow leaves, no matter how late the season got. The thestral's hooves clicked again as they landed; there must be stone not very far under the surface of the grass.

They stood on a mound in the center of the clearing, and the thestrals, visible by the glow of fog and their chains and their white eyes, stood in a circle around them. Every single one of them appeared to be staring at Harry.

Harry warbled out a low song, and grimaced as the notes stabbed him in the center of his throat. He just hoped the thestrals wouldn't think from his expression that he was unwilling to free them. He shaped a vision of them free, and then of a curious thestral sniffing at something dead to see if it was still bloody. It was the closest approximation he could think of to asking them why they wanted to be free now.

The thestral beneath him shifted and danced, but didn't reply. A stallion stepped forward from the rest of the herd, wings so wide that he blotted out several of the trees. He fixed Harry with an implacable eye, and snorted.

The image that snort gave in return was of a mare with a foal, and a pair of wings spreading, and the moon rising. There were natural times for things to happen, Harry supposed. The herd would not try to oppose those, and it would not try to oppose its own desire for freedom. They had come and fetched him because they wanted to be free now. Anything could have caused it, even the other species' changing status in the wizarding world or the fact that his vates powers apparently encouraged webs to melt.

Harry nodded, and then slid from the thestral's back to the mound. He bent down to examine the blue chain that curled around its hoof. He knew already that this wasn't a chain restricting movement; his mother had told him about Dumbledore sometimes riding thestrals to

important meetings during the War when it was too far to Apparate, or too dangerous to make multiple Apparitions in safety. So whoever had wound this web had not done it to bind them to the Forest.

He raised an eyebrow when he realized that the chain was two chains, like the two webs put on the house elves. Is one supposed to make them more docile?

No, he saw, as he touched the chain and turned it slowly over in his hand. One set of links was the web itself, a glowing tingle of pure magic he could barely feel. The other manifested a bone-deep chill that lingered in his flesh long after he drew it back, and which affected even his silver hand when he used that instead. And, briefly, Harry saw the cold chain pass through the light of the blue-glowing one, and saw that its shadow took on the shape of a Grim.

They are bound to Death. Or they are bound to keep them away from Death. A prickle like rat's claws raced down Harry's spine. That would explain something about why only those who've seen death can see them.

He looked up and sang to convey an image of a broken-winged thestral trying to fly. He did not yet know how to undo the chains, and he was afraid of what would happen if he launched himself off the cliff and tried.

The stallion stepped forward and shoved his nose into Harry's shoulder with a poke that made it feel like the sharp edge of a shovel. The implication was clear from that, no vision needed. The thestrals would give Harry time to learn what he had to, but they wanted him to study it.

Harry nodded, and stood. His mind was already whirling with possibilities. Why would ancient wizards have wanted thestrals bound? He had never heard that they were especially dangerous; other herds lived wild in the world and barely interacted with wizards, other than coming to battlefields after wars, attracted by the smell of blood. Was it simply because this particular herd was useful? Or did it have to do with the nature of webs in the Forbidden Forest, which tried to insure that every creature born there was also bound there?

But he had to put that idea aside when he studied the chains again. This was careful work. Whoever had done this had left nothing to chance. The web transferred itself generation by generation, as it did with house elves, but the sheer intricacy of the damn thing said it was also adapted to each individual. Harry might be able to unbind the whole herd if he could find the common element that guided the chains. Otherwise, he would be reduced to tediously undoing every link from every stallion, mare, and foal.

He shrugged the thought of boredom away. He had done much more boring things that still fulfilled his role as vates. He looked up and composed a short song of human parchment—surely the thestrals had seen writing before, if only by peering from the edges of the Forest at students doing their homework on the grounds—and a puzzling maze that would end with the herd flying free. He would have to study, and he wasn't entirely sure what he would have to study as yet, but he would ask Regulus.

The stallion poked him again, and this time it felt like the blunt edge of a shovel. The herd was grateful. Harry nodded and touched his silver hand to the stallion's neck in thanks, then turned away to find the path back through the Forbidden Forest.

The thestral who'd borne him thus far wheeled in front of him with a sharp turn and a snort. Harry accepted the invitation and rode back, musing all the while.

They're bound to Death. Why? Would that be to keep them from going back to her, or for some other reason?

He would have to talk to Hagrid, Harry realized suddenly. The half-giant had trained the thestrals to pull the carriages, and so a substitute would have to be found. But, more than that, he loved the herd. Harry wasn't entirely sure if the thestrals would remain in the Forest once they were free, but he would have to prepare Hagrid for the possibility that they wouldn't. Their wishes would still be honored, of course; as vates, Harry could do nothing less. But he hoped that he wouldn't have to infringe on Hagrid's free will to do this.

And he would have to have another conversation he wasn't looking forward to having, with Regulus.

Harry winced at the thought of the questions he would ask. I don't want to do this, but at the moment, Regulus is the only person I know who's spoken to Death directly, and even has her notice. Any tiny detail he knows might advance my attempts to undo the chains further than a dozen books would.

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Hagrid sniffled, and yet another large tear rolled down his nose and got itself lost in his deep, bushy beard.

"I'll miss 'em," he whimpered.

Harry patted his shoulder, feeling awkward, less for the depth of Hagrid's emotion than for the form it took. "I know you will, Hagrid," he said. "But they've got to fly free, don't they? I know that you wanted that for Norbert." It had taken him a short while to remember the name of the dragon Hagrid had rescued and tried to raise in his first year. "Don't you want that for the thestrals, too?"

“Do yeh think—” Hagrid mopped at his face with a large red handkerchief, and finished. “Do yeh think they’d let me visit ‘em?” He turned a hopeful eye on Harry.

“I don’t know where they’ll go once they’re free,” said Harry, compelled to honesty. “It could be to another place in Britain, or they might stay here, but they could also fly back across the oceans to the places where the completely wild herds live. You know that, don’t you, Hagrid?”

“Don’ want to—ter let ‘em go!” Hagrid said, and burst out in a fit of wailing. Harry hugged him this time, but his arms could barely fit around a quarter of his waist.

“What is the meaning of this, Harry?”

Somewhat guiltily, Harry glanced up to see Snape standing in front of him. It was Saturday, and he still hadn't visited his guardian that morning. "I have to free the thestrals, Professor," he said. He still preferred the title in front of members of the Hogwarts staff. "I just told Professor Hagrid so."

One of Snape's eyebrows rose, and he stood that way, looking down on them both, though Hagrid didn't appear to notice. "I see," he said, voice clipped. "And you are not releasing the thestrals without proper research into why they were bound in the first place, I hope?"

"Of course not," said Harry, a bit stung. He knew that Snape was upset he hadn't called him "Severus," but, well, he hadn't wanted to. It made him uncomfortable. The implication that he would simply dash ahead and break webs and laugh and wave his arms around, not caring for the consequences, was a bigger offense, in Harry's eyes. "I do know already that they're bound to Death, and that I'll need to talk to Regulus about his—acquaintance with some of that magic." Though Hagrid appeared lost in his sobs, Harry wasn't quite ready to mention Regulus's journey into the portrait in front of him. "So I'll look into books on necromancy and the history of the herds. Possibly another tame herd was once bound in the same way, and that could show me why this one was."

Snape's eyes held warning in them now. "Necromantic magic is dangerous, Harry."

"I know that," Harry said, thinking of Dragonsbane, thinking of Pansy. "But I need to learn whatever I must to defeat Voldemort and to free the magical creatures."

"Have a book on thestrals," Hagrid unexpectedly volunteered, still mopping at his chin and nose. "It might help. Don't know if it w-will." He sobbed once more, then stood and went into the hut to look for it. Harry looked sadly after him. Hagrid was one of the few people he knew who might appreciate magical creatures as intensely as he did. Unfortunately, he appreciated them as pets to be tamed, and that meant he was inevitably going to have trouble with the idea of freeing

them to travel to a place and context where no humans would ever try to tame them again.

“Harry.”

He faced Snape again, and saw that his guardian had knelt in the dirt, and extended one hand towards him.

“Be careful how you approach Regulus,” he said, and hesitated for long enough that Harry felt alarm rising in his chest. At last he said, “He has asked me to brew Dreamless Sleep Potion for him, to ease the nightmares of Death’s country.”

Harry swallowed and nodded. “I’ll only ask him to tell me what he wants to.” Pain was stuck like a broken breastbone in the center of his chest, as he thought of what Regulus had given up for the information on the Horcruxes, and the Mark that he now carried on his arm.

Snape swiftly rose again as he heard Hagrid coming back, his lip curling slightly. “Why the Headmaster puts up with him, I shall never know,” he murmured. “He does nothing but nearly burn his house down around his ears with dragonfire and tame animals to hand that would be better left to roam the Forest.”

“Headmistress,” said Harry.

Snape looked at him with his eyes narrowed. “What?”

“Headmistress,” said Harry, and smiled a bit, prepared to tease. “You said Headmaster, Severus.”

Snape’s eyebrows rose, and he stood stiffly for a moment. Then he nodded, and murmured, “So I did,” and turned for the school. Harry shook his head at his back. So like him not to admit when he was caught in a mistake.

“Ere you are, Harry,” Hagrid said, thumping back out and handing him a book which was dwarfed in his hand, but which made Harry’s arms sag with the weight. “All You Need To Know About Thestrals. I

added some notes about Tenebrous.” He sniffled again. “Let me know when yeh do it, so I can—I come and say g-goodbye—“ He trailed off into bawling again.

Harry patted his shoulder once more, and then cast a subtle lightening charm on the book and went back to the castle.

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Harry shrugged away the memory of the strange letter he’d received that morning as he appeared inside the wards at Grimmauld Place. If Elder Juniper wanted to put off receiving the apology Harry fully intended to give him, that was his right. Harry was a bit surprised that this was the second meeting that had fallen through, but at least it left him free to meet with Regulus.

He knocked on the house’s door for a moment, and listened. “Regulus?” he called, when no one answered.

The voice of Capella Black, Regulus and Sirius’s mother, whose picture hung in the main hall, answered at once. “Is that you, Dark Child? Come in, and let me smell you.”

Harry rolled his eyes as he opened the door and stepped inside. At least the portrait didn’t tend to shriek at him the way it had whenever someone who wasn’t perfectly pureblood brushed by it. But she insisted on calling him by a term Harry had looked up and not been impressed by. Of course, the stories Harry had heard about Capella Black hadn’t made her sound that intelligent.

“Where’s Regulus?” he asked, stopping in front of the portrait. The curtains that usually covered it were drawn back. Harry wondered if Regulus had been talking to her.

“Upstairs, dear.” The woman in the picture sniffed rapturously, and then purred in approval. “Necromancy, Dark Child? A tricky magic, but if you can learn enough of its tricks without falling prey to its sacrifices, it will make you very powerful.”

Harry rolled his eyes again, not caring if she saw it. The Dark Child was a prophetic name for the Dark Lord who would rise to dominate not only Britain but the entire wizarding world, so powerful that the wild Dark itself would claim to have sired and borne him. Regulus had told him that his mother had been waiting for a Dark Child most of her life, and had for a time sincerely believed Voldemort was him. Now she appeared to have transferred her convictions to Harry. Harry was uncertain why. It might have to do with his absorbere gift, and his ability to become more powerful if that was what he wanted. But he had spoken to Capella often enough that he would have thought she'd understand he didn't desire power.

"Upstairs, dear, dreaming of death," Capella continued in a melancholy tone. "Whereas you blaze with life." Another sniff. "And stink of death." She nodded. "I do think that you are him. You will bring a reign of night upon us all, and free us from the tyranny of Mudblood filth and blood traitors."

"Spare me," Harry muttered, and then turned as he heard Regulus's footsteps on the stairs.

"Sorry about that, Harry," he said. "I needed to—fortify myself with something."

The "something" appeared to be a glass of wine, considering what he carried in his hand. Harry stared at him in silence for a moment. Regulus flushed, looked away, muttered, and then drew the curtains closed over Capella's portrait with a suddenness that made Harry blink. He heard one more chuckle from the picture, and then she was silent, other than a faint hum that was probably the song of the Dark Child again. She had been happy to explain, when Harry asked, that the prophecy of the Dark Child was the ultimate shifting one, moving on from generation to generation and making new choices when its champion failed to appear. Harry had tried to point out that this was more likely to mean it would never come true. Capella had winked when he said that, as if he'd penetrated to the heart of some grand mystery.

"Come, Harry," Regulus said, from the stairs, and Harry shook his head and hurried up after him.

Regulus had fixed up one of the upper bedrooms as his own. Harry glanced around curiously from the doorway. The dominant color appeared to be silver—not from any Slytherin remnants, Harry thought, as much as because it was a bright color that went well with the dominant black of the house. Regulus's chest and bed and table were all sleek dark wood gleaming with inlaid traces of silver. His bedcurtains were unexpectedly thin pieces of cloth, swaying at the touch of the slight breeze Harry made as he slipped inside. The two chairs near the door were made of a white-gold wood that Harry had only seen rivaled in the Seers' Sanctuary.

Regulus sat in one of them. He took a final sip from the wineglass, then put it down and faced Harry.

“So. You want me to talk about Lady Death. How beautiful she is, maybe, since you're always rushing out to embrace her.” Regulus was trying, but trying too hard; Harry could hear the crackling strain behind the usual playful, flippant tone.

“No,” said Harry.

Regulus stared at him.

Harry leaned forward, staring directly into Regulus's eyes. He hadn't sat down yet, and was glad, because it let him get closer. “I want you to talk about what you're comfortable with,” he said. “I want to know what I can to free the thestrals, but I would never want to make you uncomfortable or violate your free will simply to do that. So tell me what you can. And if that's not enough to figure it out, then I'll continue reading. Merlin knows that both the Black library and the Hogwarts library have enough books to let me figure this out.”

He took a step back and sat in his chair, folding his arms and staring at Regulus some more. Regulus glanced away, glanced back, then picked up the glass and took an expressive drink of wine.

“Bloody vates,” he muttered.

Harry inclined his head.

Regulus sighed. "All right. I—

"You should know that I didn't really know what to expect from the picture, Harry. The descriptions given by the Black patriarchs have all varied so much that it's impossible to know what you'll find there.

"I found a desert. Its sand was brown-black, and I entered it just as the sun was going down. I've never seen light so dim, this kind of smoldering twilight. I think it was mainly the effect of the sand, but I can't be sure.

"I heard a voice hail me, calling me by name—not my first name, you understand, I don't think the creatures in the portrait know anything about time passing in our world, any more than we know about its passing in theirs. This was a raven, or so I thought. Then it moved, and I realized it was a skeleton with a coat of rotting flesh and feathers on it. They regrew every time it landed, and then fell off again in this mess of dust and maggots every time it took flight.

"It hailed me, and asked me if I would come with it. I said that I would, and then I began following it.

"It led me into traps, Harry. It led me into pits that sucked at my feet and swallowed me and consumed me alive." Regulus traced his elbow with one hand, and Harry wondered if he was remembering it being broken. "Through forests hung with bones, where one movement made them all tinkle and gasp together, and the skulls laughed at me. Over a road where I walked on what I thought were stones, until I came to the end, and then I looked down and realized that every single one of them had the imprint of Sirius's face. He was screaming, screaming forever, trapped there." Regulus shuddered and put his hands over his mouth, as though afraid he would vomit. "I'm still afraid that he's trapped there," he whispered. "In Death's country, that he's trapped there and can never get out."

"He's not," said Harry at once, thinking of the strange touch on his hand he'd felt after the Midsummer battle. "I think—I think Pansy summoned him, and he was in the fight at Hogwarts when Voldemort tried to take the castle. There were things that people talked about

later which could be explained only by the presence of a ghost among them. And I think he licked my hand before he went home. I can't believe that he only came forth to aid us and then went back to that horrible place."

Slowly, Regulus's hands lowered. "Thank you, Harry," he whispered. "Well, that's one nightmare conquered."

"I don't know how long we walked. At one point, I asked the raven why Death chose to live here. Why in such a place, instead of the way that the Greeks imagined Hades, for example? I don't know why I thought that would be more fitting, but that was the way I imagined it at the time."

"The raven laughed at me. It told me that every soul is consumed in the same endless journey, trying to find Death, and that it amuses her to put traps in front of them so that the journey continues forever. Imagine, Harry, that after we die we're doomed to walk that desolate country forever. It's no wonder that some of the dead are eager to come back as ghosts."

"But I don't think we are," said Harry, surprised. "I've read some books on necromantic magic in the last little while, you know that, researching on how to free the thestrals. They describe a dark in-between country that necromancers can access; most of the books just call it the Realm of Night. And unless the ghost or spirit is vengeful or otherwise has an interest in the living world, they have to be summoned. Most of the people who die just seem to go to sleep. Endless rest, Regulus, which isn't that different from Hades when you think of it."

Regulus shuddered restlessly, and then went on with his story without responding to what Harry had said. "I stood before Death at last. I can't describe her, Harry. She was decaying, and still beautiful. Tell me how that exists, if you can."

Harry thought of Lily and the decay of her mind and the bright frenzy of her sacrificial passion, but this time it was his turn to keep silent. Regulus was rambling on, anyway.

“She told me that she had a use for servants, that she enjoyed interfering in the world. She is patient, of course, and takes everyone when they come to her, but if she can make a bargain, then she does. She’s also unique in the world, and proud of it, and the same stern, sad reaper of lives that half a hundred religions perceive her to be. I don’t know if she looks the same to any two people. But none of that’s what you came to hear.

“She said that I would be her hand in our world, since her hands in it were chained. I think now she meant the British wizarding world, and not just our world in general. Of course she’s not chained here, and of course thestrals are free in other places.” Regulus looked up. “Does that help?”

“It does, actually,” Harry said slowly, thinking of a picture he’d seen in Hagrid’s book. It showed a thestral prancing with outstretched neck and spread wings on a bronze seal found in an ancient necromancer’s tomb. The book had said that the thestral might be considered a kind of patron saint of necromancers. It had insisted that that only came from the association of thestrals with death, but it could, Harry thought, have come because thestrals were associated with Death. “They were bound because they’re her creatures.”

“And freeing them would—“

Harry let out a breath. “I don’t know. I’ll free one and see what happens. It’s looking more and more like I’ll have to free them one by one anyway.”

Regulus nodded. He sat there with his eyes closed and his breathing quick and faint and his forehead covered with a light sheen of sweat, and Harry didn’t question the impulse that made him stand and move closer.

Regulus started a bit when his arms enveloped him, but didn’t hesitate to hug him back. Harry felt him shaking, and leaned forward to whisper into his ear.

“Nothing I can say will ever repay the debts that lie between us, for what you did for me during the year when you lived in my head, and

for what you did when you went into that portrait, and for sharing information that terrified you or made you think I would reject you. So I'll simply say thank you, and that I love you, and that I hope you enjoy the sunlight as much as you're frightened right now by the darkness."

For a moment, Regulus embraced him so desperately that Harry lost most of his breath, but he had held his breath for longer periods of time, and simply waited. When Regulus began to cry, he was there, as silent and as supportive as he could be, offering silence or soothing words as Regulus seemed to want them. Regulus's shadow rippled, dog-shaped, watching them.

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Harry licked his lips and shifted his weight forward. In the end, he had come to the Forbidden Forest alone to free a thestral, despite telling Snape that he wouldn't, because no one else thought he was ready, but the stallion—who might be Hagrid's beloved Tenebrous—had come to him last night and looked at him. A week of studying, and Hagrid's teary agreement, and Harry's growing sense that the thestrals had not killed or destroyed anyone, but had acted as heralds of Death and her power, rather like banshees. That would lead to the idea that it was unlucky to see one. Once, it had been.

Now, it might be again.

He had found the dead clearing after some minor searching; now that he knew what to look for, he found a path of withered grass and leaves crushed to black mold which led directly there. He entered to the accompaniment of many pairs of bright eyes. In short order, the gaps in the circle filled in as the rest of the herd sensed him and came to see what was happening. They moved in absolute silence now, even when they had to ease their wings past the trees or a pair came with necks entwined. Harry didn't know why. He could probably have found out if he kept reading.

But it was wrong to keep them here, when he suspected it was only fear that had kept them tied.

The stallion advanced to meet him when the circle was complete, and Harry stepped around the mound of grass and stone to kneel in front of him. He felt the cold breath spreading frost along the back of his neck. It was a reminder of how different the thestral was from any ordinary horse, but he turned and lifted a hoof like any horse letting a blacksmith examine him when Harry held out his silver hand.

He examined the chain closely, studying, one more time, the dog-shaped shadow. The purely magical chain he could absorb, but the cold one, forged in despite of Death herself, could be broken only one way.

This was the other reason he hadn't let Snape come with him, other than Snape's disagreement about him ever being ready. Snape would not appreciate what was required to break that chain.

Harry turned and laid his arm along the chain, ignoring the immediate numbness that followed, and the creeping pain. He reached into his robe pocket, thinking fleetingly how much easier this was with a left hand, even one he had to dip and scoop things up with instead of using his fingers on, and pulled out the series of small thorns he'd plucked as he walked.

Then he drove them into his arm with all his strength, shedding his blood on the chain.

The links he touched hissed and steamed and broke apart, puffing away like snow attacked by sunlight. Harry promptly began moving his arm up the chain, driving the thorns down over and over again, teeth clenched to keep from screaming. Freely given blood—not such a huge sacrifice, except that the chain was long, and there were so many chains, one tying each individual thestral, and the person who freed them would have to use thorns and not a knife.

And, of course, most of the time no one would think to free thestrals.

Harry traveled in a crouch, stabbing the thorns to open new flesh whenever it seemed that the cut would clot, and growing weaker and weaker, more and more dizzy, as his blood left him. At last, though, he had marked and dissolved the whole chain from the stallion's hoof

to the end, which floated in a tangled ball of ghostly metal somewhere in the center of the herd. Then he lay back, panting, and drank the magic of the other chain down his gullet.

His vision blurring, he saw the moment the last bond parted.

The stallion reared, his body becoming longer and thinner and more elongated, but also bigger, as though he were a piece of cloth spreading on the wind. Harry soon thought he looked like a mass of bones on a dark cape.

The Bony People, he thought. That was what the Dark meant.

The stallion's bones separated. They drifted around each other like a constellation, now and then orbiting, bound within the general confines of the unfolded skin. When the spine went below the hooves, Harry blinked in dazed confusion, and thought he should close his eyes.

He heard soft paws striking the ground beside him. He managed to open his eyes and turn his head, thinking another thestral had chosen to come near him in hopes that he could free it, or in attraction to the blood.

Instead, he saw a slim gray dog, her head positively aristocratic, her body as thin as the stallion's spine. She dipped her head, black eyes fixed on him, and such perfect cold surrounded him that, for a moment, Harry thought she had frozen him inside a black crystal.

Her tongue swept across his silver hand. Harry screamed in pain as he felt the vicious tingling pain of it, as though he was waking a limb he'd been sleeping on for hours. Then the tongue returned for another scrape, and the pain was worse, and on the third worse again. Harry heard his voice crack as the cries strained his throat again, but he really could not have stopped.

At last it ended, and Harry pulled his hands limply to him, cradling his face, uncomfortably aware of how light and clumsy they felt when he'd given up so much blood—

Wait.

Harry pulled his hands back and stared. His left hand was flesh now, its healing process and acclimation to his body seemingly sped up, and it flexed and responded as the other did. There remained only one patch of silver, right in the middle of it.

It might have resembled a dog's head, if Harry could have squinted enough.

He shivered, and then rolled his head over to see the gray dog standing next to the unfurled thestral, who was putting himself back together again, in—indescribable ways. When he'd more or less wrapped himself in a lump of skin, they both turned to look at Harry. He heard a faint, high, chilling cry.

And then both were gone, and Harry felt another thestral grip his hair, while yet another rolled him gently over. He clung to consciousness long enough to see them pick him up and begin transporting him towards Hogwarts. He also managed to summon enough magic, with the power he'd just swallowed, to set up a flare of green sparks about the color of the Killing Curse. That would attract attention, and insure that he saw Madam Pomfrey to get a Blood-Replenishing Potion.

The night around him seemed deeper, wilder. He wasn't surprised when the black wolf came and paced at the flying pair's side again.

The Bony People are going slowly home. And Death knows you. The wolf laughed, a deeper and more disturbing sound than Harry had ever heard one of his pack make. An uncomfortable life you have, little cousin.

And it turned and broke apart into blackness again. Harry closed his eyes and tried to determine what would get him into more trouble: going into the Forbidden Forest alone, or the long, ragged wound that ran the length of his right arm.

Somewhere in the wondering, he passed into darkness.

Intermission: Come Home to Your Heart

Severus held himself still. The madness of his rage might have something to do with that. If he moved, if he spoke, he would explode.

He knew he should have suspected this would happen sooner or later. But he had not foreseen it happening so soon. He had thought he'd managed to keep the Headmaster's trust better than that, that Albus would accept his story of being there in the graveyard just out of time to rescue Harry, and that he stood a chance of completing the mission the Dark Lord had set him: to find out a way to get past the wards into the hidden house where Connor Potter was being trained.

And now Albus had told him this.

"I am sorry, Severus," Albus said gently, his face drawn. But there was a light in the back of his eyes, a great light, where there had been none before, and Severus knew that things truly had changed. "But I cannot tell you the truth right now. It's not solely my decision. Lily had to give her permission, too, and she chose not to." He hesitated for a moment. "Harry's loss very nearly broke her. She is not so eager to risk the safety of her sole remaining child."

Severus hid his sneer. Harry's loss broke her because she believed that they had no hope of defeating my Lord without him. I know very well how she treated the boy. It was not a child but a weapon she lost. "And so I, who have done more than any other single person but you for the cause, Headmaster, am exiled from your inner counsels," he snarled.

"That is the matter as it stands right now, Severus." Albus's eyes were mild, but implacable. "If it makes you feel better, neither James nor Minerva know, either. Lily is dead-set against telling anyone but me until she is sure that what we suspect is true, and we have truly found a new way to reassert the prophecy."

Severus inclined his head. "May I be dismissed, Headmaster?"

Albus sighed. "I wish you would not go away angry, my boy. This exclusion is not targeted at you alone."

“May I be dismissed, sir?” Severus fastened his eyes on the wall over Albus’s shoulder and spoke the way a schoolboy would.

“You may, Severus.”

He turned his back, not wanting to see the condescending kindness in those blue eyes, and walked away.

So. They have someone else who loves Connor Potter, someone who can stand at his back and provide power when he faces my Lord. And due to the nature of prophecy, it may even work. They cannot have found another Harry—

Except that, Severus reminded himself sharply, he knew so little about Connor Potter’s training in recent months that anything was possible. He had failed in his mission. He had gained control of Connor’s father, but questioning his old enemy would win him nothing when Lily refused to tell the secret even to her husband.

Severus played with the possibility that Lily might not be able to resist the temptation or the stress and would give in, but he knew that the hope was a faint one. She kept Harry’s training from him for a decade and more. She isn’t going to risk the secret she thinks the safety of the whole world rests on.

He strode into the solitude of his dungeons. His Lord had commanded him to begin work on a new potion. This one was to be a seemingly harmless variant on Veritaserum; it would make the drinker tell lies instead of truths. Severus could easily pass it off as a potion done to keep his hand in if anyone asked.

The effects of the potion when they remained in the drinker’s system for a time would be—quite different.

Severus shut the dungeon door behind him and began to brew the potion, which he had already decided should be a deep green, only a few shades short of the color of the Killing Curse. That meant he couldn’t use half the ingredients that would ordinarily have gone into a Veritaserum variant. Concentrating deeply on such a challenge

would keep him from lashing out with magic, the sole intent of which was to destroy Albus Dumbledore.

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“Here he is,” Albus’s voice said, and the members of the Order of the Phoenix turned their heads as he ushered Connor Potter into the room.

They were all there, including Moody, who had finally managed to kill Evan Rosier last night, and Nymphadora Tonks, who was their best spy in an increasingly hostile Ministry since Scrimgeour had been cast out by a vote of no confidence. His Lord had laughed when he heard about that, Severus remembered. It seemed only proper that the Minister Harry had elevated into power should fall with him.

Such thoughts boiled into less than steam in Severus’s mind when he saw Connor Potter.

Nine months, from June to March, hiding in isolation and training, had changed the boy. There were deep shadows beneath his eyes that would have been more usual beneath Harry’s. He was as thin as Lupin, and walked with as steady a gait as the werewolf after a full moon. But he radiated more controlled power. Severus could sense the irritating traces of a formal Declaration, too, if he pushed himself. The boy had given himself to the Light.

But none of that would have been enough to defeat the Dark Lord. Severus would have been more amused than anything, if not for the look in the boy’s eyes, and in Albus’s, and in Lily’s. She walked behind her son, one hand balanced lightly on his shoulder, the other hovering near his head, as if she wanted to flick back the fringe and show the heart-shaped scar for all to see.

Albus was the confident man he had not been since the First War. Connor Potter might have been carved of marble, both his face and the resolve in that face.

And Lily Evans Potter shone from within as though filled with flame.

They have found a hope they believe in, Severus thought, narrowing his eyes further. And the boy might be deceived, and even his mother, though she would not give her belief to something less than absolutely Light. But Albus would not make a mistake that could lose him the war, not now, not after all the effort he put into the training of Harry and the Potter brat.

“Wizards and witches of the Order of the Phoenix,” Albus Dumbledore announced, in a voice that had none of the strain he had shown for the last few meetings, “meet your champion, the Boy-Who-Lived, Connor Potter.”

Several people stood up to applaud as Connor bowed. Severus thought he was the only one who watched Albus in that moment, who saw the soft and kindly look he darted towards the boy.

The world froze, and filled with light.

Albus. Albus is the one who loves the boy. Albus is the one who will stand at his right shoulder when the moment comes.

And given the prophecy and Albus’s immense power and the strange connection forged between the Potter brats and his Lord on that fateful Halloween night—even now, Severus knew Voldemort had not chosen to trust him with all the secrets of that connection—there was at least a chance the Order of the Phoenix would win the war.

Severus joined the applause, but his mind rang with exultation, like a struck bell, for an entirely different reason. He knew the news he would carry to his Lord. He knew the permission he would ask.

If all went as he expected it would, that permission should be granted, and he could at last have his revenge on Albus Dumbledore for not expelling Sirius Black and the others all those years ago.

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Severus opened his eyes with a gasp. A surge of some powerful emotion had awakened him, but he could not grasp what it was. The

dream was already breaking up, scurrying madly to the corners of his mind as they always did now.

He vaguely remembered Dumbledore, and the Potter brat, and shuddered. Likely he had had a nightmare of dueling the boy while the Headmaster stood in the corner and encouraged him to be kinder. He was glad that he could not remember it.

He swung out of his bed, and examined his potions. Lately, he awoke as if by Muggle clockwork with enough time in the morning to do some brewing before he went to teach his classes. Perhaps he could even finish his newest potion this morning; it was very nearly done.

He gave it a nod of approval, the thick green potion shimmering in the cauldron next to the purple poison and the silver healing draught. Yes, it was very nearly done. Strange, to think it had started as a commission from the twin Weasleys. Severus had bottled and sent the sample they'd paid for on to them, but had retained most of it for himself, fascinated by the harmless but intricate properties the potion displayed.

He bottled it, a procedure that took most of the time he had remaining, and then hurried to put on his formal robes and go to the Great Hall for breakfast.

On the way there, Snape shook his head. Very strange, how refreshed he felt during these mornings, when his intense dreams—whatever they were about—and early awakenings seemed to argue that he should feel tired. Very strange.

But then, the human body and mind had their vagaries. Few wizards knew that better than he.

And the matter went out of his head, entirely, when McGonagall caught him on his way to the Great Hall, explained briefly that they hadn't been able to get through the wards on his quarters, and then explained what Harry had been doing in the Forbidden Forest last night.

Chapter Eighty-One: Our Own Voices

“You should have known better.”

Harry opened his eyes to those words, and realized almost at once that he would not have an easy time persuading Snape that he was fine. He rolled his head over on the pillows, much as he had rolled it to look at the gray dog who had come to represent Death, and grimaced. His head was still light and faintly fuzzy from loss of blood. It wasn't the ideal position to be arguing from.

But he could see by the light coming through the windows of the hospital wing that it was morning, and he bore no wounds that he could feel save the long, jagged one in his right arm and the many light scrapes and bruises that he would have from falling on the stones in the Forest. He had survived and come back mostly whole. And he had had numerous hours to sleep and recover. Madam Pomfrey must have given him a Blood-Replenishing Potion. That meant he should be ready to face Snape.

He heaved himself up on his left elbow, as he knew his right arm would simply go watery and drop him in a moment. He held Snape's eyes calmly. “I knew that you wouldn't have let me do what I needed to do,” he said. “You'd told me as much. When I mentioned spilling blood on the chain, even in the most casual way, you forbade me to do so. So I had to go alone in order to make sure the thestrals were freed by the only thing that would dissolve that cold chain. That's all.”

Snape's face looked like dark stone in its rage. He leaned nearer. “It will not be happening again,” he said.

“Yes, it will,” said Harry. He could feel his insides squirming in discomfort. He had felt bad slipping alone into the Forest without even leaving a note, though someone could have found the note before he reached the grounds and come after him. But it would have been a hundred times worse had he not been doing this as part of his vates duties. Yes, as a child he had run away and done things on his own for stupid reasons, or to satisfy his training to protect Connor. But he had made sure in his reading. Blood was the only way to free

the thestrals. The blood had to be drawn by thorns, not a knife and not a spell. Something about thornbushes growing in the native territory thestrals were from. Harry had not made up the requirements of the procedure. He had merely decided to answer them.

“It will not.”

Harry blinked and leaned a little away from Snape, using his right hand to wipe carefully at the fleck of spittle that had landed on his face. He hadn't seen his guardian this passionate in a long, long time. He had lowered his voice instead of raising it, and Harry did have the impulse to cast down his eyes. But how could he? He had done what he needed to do. If he promised not to do it again, then he would be betraying the most important path he walked.

“I have to use thorns,” he said. “I have to use blood. If you wish, you can come with me next time, but I really didn't trust you not to Stun me and take me back to Hogwarts the moment I opened my arm, sir.”

“And you were right to doubt that I would have let you do this mad thing.” Snape's voice just got colder and colder, harder and harder. “There must be some other way to free them, Harry. Find it.”

“There isn't,” Harry pointed out patiently. “I have been trying to find some other method that would work for most of a week. And it's blood, and it's thorns. I'm sorry. But just like a Calming Draught won't change its base for all that I worked on it, this won't change for all that you protest, sir.”

Snape closed his eyes and murmured something violent, his wandless magic leaping and crackling like lightning around him. Harry watched him in concern. He wasn't going to change his mind about this, no matter how much guilt he felt or what arguments Snape used. He wished he did know a way to ease Snape's fear, though.

“Let me, sir. I think I can handle him.”

Harry's head jerked up. Draco stood in the doorway to the hospital wing, leaning against it. Now he stalked inside, and came straight up to Harry's bed. Harry swallowed back a surge of nervousness. He

hadn't seen Draco this truly angry in months. Petulant sulks over not getting his way were one thing. This Draco had a manner that reminded him partly of Narcissa and partly of Snape.

Draco touched Harry's right arm just above his wound, eyes never leaving his face. "You would say that this was an acceptable price, correct, Harry? You would say that, if your vates path leads you in that direction, it's simply the one you have to go?"

Harry nodded, mesmerized by the way that Draco's eyes speared him.

"And what happens if you meet a magical species whom you have to free by sacrificing the person dearest to you?" Draco asked quietly. "Or by giving up your ability to love? Would you accept that bargain?"

"There doesn't exist such a species," said Harry, feeling his back half-arch.

"There could." Draco watched him thoughtfully, mercilessly, his face showing no signs of yielding. "You don't know everything about the magical species of the world yet, Harry, and especially not the webs that bind them. There could be something wonderful or terrible out there that would demand its freedom from you at that cost." He leaned close, until Harry could feel his breath on his cheek. "Or there could be one you would die to free. You nearly died to free one thestral last night. One, Harry. And you will have to nearly die again and again to free the rest."

"I didn't think my life was in danger," Harry said, trying to pull away. Draco's hand clamped on the back of his neck, and that, combined with the weakness in his muscles from the blood loss, wouldn't let him move. "I knew my magic would work to save my life."

"Then what's this?" Draco seized his left hand and turned it over.

"A gray dog came and licked it back into flesh," Harry said stolidly, but winced when Draco's nails clanged off the small patch of silver that remained in the middle of the palm. Yes, it was shaped like a dog's head.

"You didn't know that would happen," Draco said. "You didn't know anything about the cost of freeing the thestrals, Harry, not really. You only knew how it had to be done. Tell me, why couldn't you have used the blood from an animal to do this? Is there something in the books that forbids it?"

"The animal wouldn't have given the blood of its free will," Harry reminded him tightly. "I did."

"And the books say that the chain has to be broken with the blood of a willing sacrifice?"

Harry knew he'd hesitated a moment too long.

Draco reached out and took his chin in an almost crushing grip. "I knew it," he breathed. "That was all you, that decision to use your own blood. If you do it again, Harry, I am going to break off the joining ritual."

Fear froze his insides more than the guilt ever could have. Harry stared into Draco's face and finally whispered, "You wouldn't—don't do that. Don't even threaten that."

"And why not?" Draco's eyes were bright, scornful. "You say that you wouldn't give up someone dear to you or the ability to love, Harry. And yet you would give up what permits you to be dear to other people and to love them, your life. You've never valued it enough. You've treated it like some counter on a game board. I did think you were mostly healed of that tendency, but this proves you aren't. It will end. Remember what I said, Harry." His hand caressed Harry's cheek, and he leaned in and kissed him hard enough to hurt, to steal breath. "With this one action," he murmured, breath puffing against Harry's lips, "you've said that you don't value the rituals we've gone through so far, the possibility of what we could be when the joining's done in about two years, or my presence in your life."

"I didn't say that!" Harry yelled, feeling his hold on his temper slip. "I didn't think I would die!"

“But you put your life in enormous danger, and you did it without telling anyone where you were going, and you ignored an easily available choice that wouldn’t have put you in danger at all,” Draco said smoothly, and stepped away from the bed. “And you knew we would worry, Professor Snape and I and your brother and all the others who love you, and you did it anyway. You put one magical species ahead of all the others you need to fight for and free. What would have happened to the house elves if you died in the Forbidden Forest, Harry?”

“Dobby spoke better for them than I ever could have—“

“Which doesn’t mean they don’t need you,” said Draco tightly. “Idiot. Look me in the eye and tell me that you value your life, Harry.”

“I do,” said Harry, glaring at him. There was guilt ripping through him now, shredding him with bloody claws when he tried to think about this from Draco’s or Snape’s point of view.

“And tell me that you value the people in your life.”

“You know I do. I shouldn’t have to prove that.”

“But you do,” said Draco, “because you seem to have given up all notion of keeping them and loving them last night. Prove to me that you do, Harry. Voluntarily protect your life for at least the next month, until the Walpurgis ritual. And never do something like this again.”

He turned and left before Harry had a chance to reply.

Snape said, “He executes the punishment of a partner. I am going to execute the punishment of a parent, Harry. Detention every night for a month. Yes,” he added, when Harry opened his mouth. “That includes weekends.”

“But sir—“

Snape looked at him.

“Severus,” Harry corrected himself with a groan. “I—how can it be moral to use an animal’s blood like that, put it through extreme pain in order to do something I want to do?”

“As well ask how it can be moral to make those who love you worry so much,” Snape said, and turned away. “I will await you in my office tonight, Harry. Do not worry, it will be light labor, in deference to your healing arm.”

He left. Harry lay back on his bed and stared at the ceiling, feeling his cheeks burn with humiliation and rage.

The rage was small, though, buried beneath the guilt for the most part.

I just—I just thought they would be angry at me, but because I lied to them. I never thought they would believe I didn’t value my life. I do. It’s just—

And at the wording of his next thought, Harry nearly swallowed his tongue.

It’s just less important than other things.

Harry curled up in confusion, tucking his pillow beneath his cheek. He hadn’t realized the implications that thought would have to Draco and Snape, what they would think and feel if they could hear him say it.

Perhaps it was time he did.

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It took labor for Draco to eat silently beside Harry instead of simply giving in, wrapping his arms around him, and taking him back to their bedroom for a round of sex that would knock most of the arguments between them away.

But it was labor he had committed himself to, and now he had to do it.

He shot a narrow-eyed look at Harry, who was picking miserably at his breakfast. Two days of rest, other than attending detentions with

Snape, had improved Harry's health considerably. But his mood hadn't followed that. He had been quiet and downcast the first time Draco saw him after their argument, and he'd remained quiet and downcast since.

He slopped orange juice instead of milk into his cornflakes as Draco watched. Draco shivered a little. Now the desire to reach over and comfort Harry was so strong that it felt like a wave of the sea, running through him and slapping his body from side to side.

And still he refrained. He and Harry had a philosophical difference between them in this area at least as deep as the one that had lain between his parents about his disownment. Narcissa could not have yielded to Lucius without loss of face and proving that she didn't really care what he did to their family. Draco knew the same thing applied to him now. Yield, and Harry would not take him seriously. He would risk his life again, knowing he would have, at most, a few days of discomfort afterwards—a small price to pay for a freed thestral.

Draco wanted the lesson to go home once and for all. And it would. He could endure days in misery. It made his food taste bad and left his hands itching for a touch of Harry's skin, but that was better than endless nights for the rest of his life lying awake and wondering where Harry was this time and whether he would come home alive.

Draco had thought once that he refused to be a suffering little wife, left behind while Harry went on adventures. Well, he refused to be the hapless partner either, left lying asleep while Harry risked his life, especially when there were less risky choices to accomplish the same goal. Harry would learn to value his life if only because Draco valued it.

Otherwise...

Draco took a deep breath, and scraped at his plate with unnecessary violence, since his food was already gone and there was nothing left to move around.

Otherwise he would break the joining ritual. He had said he would, and he meant it. He refused to be left behind, to be considered less

Add to that the fact that, while he was in Snape's office writing about the stories, he couldn't be outside, running about in the Forbidden Forest and ripping his arms open with thorns, and Snape thought the trade was more than fair. Harry would learn something. He would have Harry under his eye. A month of detentions ought to press the lesson home through even a skull as thick as his son's.

Snape marked the essay in front of him 'T' with a flourish.

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Connor waited patiently around the corner. He could hear soft voices from ahead of him, one a voice he'd known since childhood and the other one he'd grown resigned to hearing for the rest of his life. They were conducting a whispered, private conversation that he didn't try to listen to. It was no one's business but their own what they said.

But between him and them, standing unnoticed in this short side-corridor, was another person.

One who had been following Harry around lately, though his brother had been so sunk in abstracted misery he hadn't noticed.

One who had decided to intrude where he wasn't wanted, and whom Connor had finally decided to put a stop to.

He heard a faint smacking sound, and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. You better appreciate what I'm doing for your sake, Harry, he complained inwardly. It's bad enough that I know you and Draco kiss, I don't need confirmation of it.

A moment later, he heard a soft and whirring click, and his hand shot around the corner, grabbed the collar of the person waiting just ahead, and dragged him back around the corner. He squeaked as Connor turned him sideways and slammed him into the wall. Thanks to the bubble of the Silencing Charm Connor stood in, and which now included his captive as well, neither Harry nor Draco heard. Connor glanced warily around the corner and saw them standing close together, so absorbed in each other it was a bit sickening.

Luckily, he had a diversion.

“Colin,” he said, and produced his best predatory smile, the one that Parvati, impressed, had said made him look like a mad murderer escaped from Tullianum. “Hullo.” Then he waited.

Colin Creevey looked in several directions for a moment, eyes darting as if he thought Connor must be referring to some other Colin. Then he sagged, and said, staring at the floor, “Um, hullo, Connor.”

“That’s a nice camera,” said Connor, indicating the one that Colin still held in his hand. “I’d reckon it helps you take pictures of things—oh, all sorts of things that no one else is ever going to notice.”

The boy perked up, the way he usually did when someone was talking about photography with him. “It does,” he said. “I took a picture of a flower the other day that grows on the edge of the Forbidden Forest and isn’t in any of the Herbology books. Even Neville said he hadn’t seen anything like it. Do you want to see it?” He started fumbling and patting at the pockets of his robes.

“Not now, Colin,” said Connor pleasantly. “I’m much more interested in the picture that you just took.”

Colin fixed him with wide, innocent eyes, and laughed a little. “Just took? Oh, there aren’t any like that, Connor.”

“Now,” Connor said, and snapped his teeth hard enough that Colin jumped and tried to get away from him. Thanks to the hand on his collar, he naturally couldn’t. “The one of my brother and Draco Malfoy kissing, Colin. Merlin knows I don’t want to see it, but I’ve made worse sacrifices for him.”

“It’s not what you think,” said Colin sulkily, as he unhooked the camera from its strap and handed it over to Connor. “I mean—I didn’t take the picture because I’m going to sell it to the Daily Prophet or anything like that. I took it because I noticed something strange about Harry’s right arm.”

“What about it?” Connor stared at the camera for a moment, but he was satisfied that he’d tackled Colin too quickly for Colin to tamper with it. He put it in his own robe pocket and smiled at Colin. “You’ll get it back after the evidence has been destroyed.”

“I thought he might have the Dark Mark,” Colin said earnestly. “That bandage on his arm, when he wasn’t in a fight?”

Connor rolled his eyes, not bothering to hide it. The world disappointed him with its stupidity, sometimes. But he could still have a bit of fun, and that would make up for the fact that he’d have to see, and destroy, a picture of his brother kissing his boyfriend.

“Death Eaters wear the Dark Mark on their left forearms,” he said.

“Oh.” Colin deflated.

Connor paused as though thinking, then leaned closer. “Listen,” he said. “I’ll promise to tell you what he did if you’ll promise to stop following him. And not tell anyone else, either.”

“You would?” Colin’s whole face shone with a disturbing mixture of greed and hero-worship. “Oh, thank you, Connor! I promise, no one else will hear about this, I promise, I promise, I promise—”

“Once was enough,” Connor muttered, and then started speaking softly, Silencing Charm or not. “He went into the Forbidden Forest to free thestrals. To do that, he had to use thorns on his arm.”

“Really?” Colin breathed, eyes wide.

“Yes.” Connor lowered his voice further, as though he were afraid of Harry walking around the corner and discovering them. Colin, who probably hadn’t realized they stood in a Silencing Charm, leaned nearer in fascination. “He had to bleed from the hole cut by the thorns, and spread it along the chain. And of courser, he had to keep opening the wound again when it was about to clot.”

Colin swayed a little closer as Connor lowered his voice to a whisper. “And then the chain was gone, and the thestral free, and do you know what it did?”

“What?” Colin asked.

“It—“

Connor raised his voice abruptly, yelling right into Colin’s face. “Hurt him!”

Colin scrambled away from him with a shriek, and took off down the corridor in the direction of Gryffindor Tower.

Connor laughed as long and loudly as he wanted, and then went on his way, now and then patting the camera in his pocket, whistling. It seemed as though his brother and his brother-in-law had made up, and so things were swinging back towards equilibrium in their small corner of the world.

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“It was actually the Horcruxes that made me think the most about what you said, you know.”

Draco lifted his head from Harry’s shoulder and blinked at him. He’d been half-dozing his way through the afternoon; since Harry had come up to him, apologized, and said that he’d thought about what Draco had said and believed it to be mostly true, he’d been so overwhelmed with emotions that sleep felt like the best thing. Granted, he was half-thinking this peace would splinter at any moment and Harry would shout at him—they’d never had an argument conclude so quietly, without emotional collapses and yelling and breakdowns—but perhaps this was a sign of how they had both grown up.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Harry stroked his hair. His hands hadn’t quite stopped touching Draco ever since they came back to their bedroom. Draco could not say that he minded. “I’m researching Horcruxes to find a way to get around

the requirement of sacrifice,” he said. “Why shouldn’t I research the thestrals to find some way to get around the requirement of shedding my own blood on the chains?”

Draco tensed a bit. This was the part where their “mostly” agreement mostly ran out. “You can use the blood of an animal,” he told Harry. “That’s not immoral. You don’t owe anything to ordinary animals as you do to the magical creatures.”

Harry ignored him. “Both involve sacrifice,” he said. “But the one was unthinkable to me. Why not the other?” His hand curled around a lock of Draco’s hair and tugged. “Because it was me, and not other people, who was in danger of losing my life in the Forbidden Forest? What a stupid reason that would have been to refuse to research this further.” He snorted and tucked his head into Draco’s shoulder, his words muffled. “So I thought about it, and thought about it, and yes, you were mostly right. I don’t like the threat you made, and I don’t think that you were right about killing animals to shatter the chains, but you were right about the rest. It’s simply stupid to propose exceptions between me and other people when I know that we both inhabit the same plane of importance now.”

Draco wondered which part of that to respond to, and in the end chose the most innocuous. He doubted that Harry would want to hear arguments for bleeding animals but not killing them right now, or to hear that his life was more important than the lives of the vast majority of wizards in Britain. “It wasn’t just a threat. I would have broken the joining ritual, Harry. I don’t deserve to be in a relationship where I’m treated as less than your equal.”

Harry rolled over and squinted thoughtfully up at him. “I didn’t know if you would be able to go through with it,” he said. “That was why I called it a threat, instead of a promise.”

Draco stared at him, and then looked away. He’d come to regret saying that more and more often as April and their argument both wore on, and if matters had gone down to that point, he didn’t know if he could have turned away from Harry, either. It wasn’t something he liked to spend a lot of time contemplating. It had just felt like something that needed to be said, to show how serious he was.

“Just don’t put me in a situation like that, and we won’t ever have to find out how much I meant it,” he said, striving to keep his voice light.

Harry’s hand cupped his ear, and he tipped it to the side so that he could kiss the skin behind it. “I don’t want to,” he whispered. “Hopefully, I’ll know better than to do something that brings it up.”

Draco closed his eyes and gave in to the light touches, the pleasure sweeping through him as Harry gently bit and blew on his ears. Yes, he didn’t want to think about it. This argument was done with, and hopefully it would never arise again, if Harry really had thought about what it meant that he’d put his life in such danger. He would much rather think about other things.

Including the fact that in just a few more weeks, it would be the end of April, and the time for their second Walpurgis ritual, the fifth out of thirteen, taking place on the anniversary of the first.

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Harry had been thinking a lot. The week when he’d barely spoken to Draco and spent his detentions reading stories that barely took up his attention had left him with time to do that.

And he was beginning to think that, if his life was equal in importance to others’—

And if he distressed people this much when he put it in danger, the same way that he would have been distressed if Snape was the one in danger, or Connor, and let’s not even talk about the heart-freezing fear he’d felt when Rosier had cast the Lung Domination Curse on Draco—

And if he would become indignant on the behalf of someone who was put off constantly by the Ministry in the way that he had been—

Then perhaps that meant that, when the third letter arrived saying that Elder Juniper could not meet with him to accept his apology yet, and would Harry try again next weekend, he had no obligation to

write a reply accepting the new proposed meeting date.

Instead, he wrote one with his Transfiguration book braced on his knee to support the parchment, now and then using a Levitation Charm to hold on to the parchment, and sometimes remembering to use his new left hand. Really, it had been a wonderful thing that Death did for him, when she turned the silver hand to flesh.

Though it would not have been worth the price of your life.

He shook the thought away and bent over the letter again. He highly doubted that Elder Juniper needed to know about his exploits in the Forbidden Forest. What he seemed most interested in so far was the performance Harry had given at the festival after freeing the sirens, and refusing to accept an apology and put the matter behind them once and for all.

Harry answered in the cool tone that he would have advised someone else to show with an offended acquaintance who was being this difficult about settling something important.

April 8th, 1997

Dear Elder Juniper:

I am writing again to offer you an apology for my behavior at the festival that the Minister tried to hold in my honor directly after the vernal equinox. I have done so twice before, wishing to apologize in person, and each time the meetings have fallen through. Now I have received another letter asking me to wait, but specifying no reason that I should have to do so.

I wish to make amends with you, sir, but if we cannot do it face-to-face, the medium of parchment is surely ancient and honorable enough to do so. I hereby say I am sorry yet again, and if you wish to meet with me on the third weekend of the month, then I am available to you.

Sincerely,

Harry vates, Heir of Black.

He felt a bit odd adding that last, but reminding Juniper that he had some claim to an ancient pureblood line—albeit a Dark one, and not a Light one, which Juniper would have respected more—could not hurt.

Draco read it over his shoulder, and pressed his hand down once in approval. Harry sealed it with the Black crest and went to send it by owl. Perhaps this would content Juniper. If nothing else, Harry could not continually make plans for meetings that had to be abandoned, because that meant he didn't have mornings and afternoons free for doing the necessary study to find another way to defeat the Horcruxes or free the thestrals.

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“He may know something.”

Aurora frowned at Juniper's head in the fireplace and went on twisting the braid of hair she'd assembled into an Egyptian pattern she'd learned. "And why do you think that?"

Juniper silently held up a letter. Aurora stooped closer to the hearth so she could read it. She frowned more as she did, and sighed at the end. Suspicion isn't impossible, and I suppose that we couldn't put Harry off forever.

“And what are you going to do, Elder?” she asked, carefully moving away as the braid threatened to slip out of her hands and trail into the flames.

“Give him his meeting,” said Juniper. “It should not harm anything. We are debarred from immediate action, anyway. If I allow him to see my face when he apologizes and see, in turn, the Order of Merlin pinned to his shirt, then I daresay nothing evil will happen.”

Aurora bit her lip thoughtfully. “You don’t think the Order of Merlin will give him political influence sufficient to counteract what we’re planning?”

“Unlikely,” said Juniper. “Most of the witnesses to the festival remember his vanishing more than they do the reward. If it’s a private meeting and Harry does not announce it again to the newspapers—and why would he, since he is so reserved about claiming such honors for himself?—then the fuss should die naturally. Until we choose to stir it up again, of course.”

Aurora caught her breath. Juniper was being more open in his contempt of Harry than he had been when she had seen him last. “Does that mean that you think we must move against him, sir?” Even as she negotiated with Juniper, she had never been sure that he wouldn’t announce one day that acting against Harry was impossible and they might as well make the best of a bad situation.

“I think we must,” Juniper murmured. “I have studied his political activities over the last several years, Madam Whitestag, and not merely the information that you gave me.” Aurora felt a stab of pride, that she had an ally who could take the initiative that way. It was not something that would have occurred to Lisa Addlington or Marvin Gildgrace. “And I see consistent patterns. A fuss emerges, either from one of Harry’s mistakes or one of his heroics. He acts embarrassed in the wake of it, and speaks to the newspapers like one who does not know how to make the best of either his notoriety or his fame. Some aspects of his psychology—the desire to hide, for example—became clearer when I studied the records of his parents’ trial. His relationship with Albus Dumbledore was hardly something to boast of, either.” For a moment, Juniper’s face darkened with anger. Aurora knew he was thinking about the disgrace Albus Dumbledore had been to the Light. She kept silent. She was undeclared, so it wasn’t her place to comment on Juniper’s allegiance. “But it is, in context, good news for us. He was reluctant to strike until the very last moment, even given what the man had done to him. The reports of how he killed Dumbledore are consistent as well. Self-defense.”

“And what are the implications that you see for our long-term strategy?” Aurora asked. She knew what ones she would draw, but

she had been wrong before. She wished to see what Juniper would say.

“He will be reluctant to fight us,” said Juniper. “He will be equally reluctant to oppose legal measures directed specifically at him. It was the laws against werewolves, including that ill-advised hunting season, that stirred him into anger enough to rebel. He thinks he can weather attacks on himself, and he has little regard for his honor or his pride.” He brandished the letter again. “Even with this, which is the first touch of pride I’ve seen from him, I think it was the multiple refusals that nettled him, not the fact that I refused to meet.”

Aurora nodded. Juniper seemed to understand Harry well, and the extra time provided by the missed meetings hadn’t revealed any secret legal weapon they could use against Harry—only that they would need the support of either more of the Wizengamot or more of the Light wizards than they currently possessed. “Then I suppose that the apology and the Order of Merlin could do no harm, and might even reassure him that you bear him no ill-will, sir.”

Juniper laughed softly. “As indeed I do not. This insult is merely a convenient excuse.” He pulled his head back from the fire. “Until our meeting a few days hence, Madam Whitestag.”

Aurora bowed to him, and waited until the fire died before she knelt down. The braid she Levitated across the room. It had taken a long time, and included the hair of many people she couldn’t get a strand from again, including her own dead children. It would never do to have it burned.

She cast a handful of Floo powder into the flames, and waited patiently until the flames sparked green and cleared, revealing a room paneled in white wood that was really just opulent enough. If Aurora had been a Light witch, she thought she would have wanted her home to look like that.

A house elf at once hurried into the room, and stopped, squeaking and bowing, when it saw her.

Aurora smiled at it. "Would you fetch Madam Apollonis for me, please? Tell her Aurora Whitestag would like to speak with her."

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The letter that arrived back from Elder Juniper, confirming their meeting for the third weekend in April, pleased Harry, but not as much as the letter that arrived a few days later. It was at lunch when the Augurey flew through the window of the Great Hall, squawking awkwardly, and landed on the Slytherin table by planting its head in the mashed potatoes. There was more than one burst of laughter. Harry had to admit that the Irish phoenix was hardly the most graceful bird. This one, hopping back to its feet only to half-tilt and almost step on its own feathered tail, rather reminded him of Tonks.

It at last managed to arrange itself and hold out its leg, and Harry took the envelope and opened it. He was already relearning how to use a living left hand again. So much easier than some of the magic that he'd used to open envelopes and perform other simple tasks before, he thought. He'd even noticed that he felt slightly more alert, as though the permanent Levitation Charm had been a grand drain on his magic and he'd never noticed it.

The letter was in a hand he didn't recognize, and saluted him by every title the writer could think of. Harry didn't mind that nearly as much as he thought he would, not when he read the rest of the contents.

My name is Periwinkle Lyrebird. You probably haven't heard of my family before; we are purebloods, but we fell on hard times several generations ago, and our name was never honored as much as some of the older and more native families'. We have had little but our name and our honor for those several generations—and our house elves. There are several other Irish wizarding families in the same situation.

We had one other thing in common, until recently. That was faith in the patronage and leadership of Cupressus Apollonis. Even if we had found some other powerful wizard willing to lead us, he would have found it difficult to make headway in Ireland against Apollonis. They

are simply too powerful, that house. Even when we heard of you, you didn't seem very interested in Light purebloods as allies unless they could offer you fighters, so we followed Cupressus in silence.

That changed with the alliance meeting that you held last spring, and the news of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. And now we have heard that Cupressus lost control of his daughter. You faced him that day, and yet you walked out alive, and so did the Lady Ignifer. That once would not have happened, when Apollonis was at the height of his strength. He is afraid of you, and you can defy him successfully.

The other poor Light Irish families have appointed me their spokeswitch. What I am prepared to offer you, vates, is our allegiance and the freedom of our house elves in exchange for protection from Cupressus and certain financial considerations for our house elves. We can survive without them. We have been reluctant to give them up because of what they said about our status, but this is a new world, and the concept of status is changing. If you can provide what we ask for, we are yours.

Sincerely,

Periwinkle Lyrebird.

Harry could not stop grinning. Millicent read over his shoulder, and then let out a low, impressed whistle. Harry glanced at her. Sometimes—in fact, since the day her father had been captured and taken into the Department of Mysteries—she had acted as if she would prefer to avoid his company, but now she peered at him with bright, challenging eyes.

“And you'll be accepting their offer, I suppose, Harry?” she drawled.

“Of course.” Harry gave Draco the letter. “I have money that can repay them for their house elves. And that's a sacrifice I would much rather make, Galleons to avoid infringing on anyone's free will, rather than—others.” His left hand flickered towards the slowly closing wound on his right arm, rather than outright referring to it.

Millicent raised her eyebrows and nodded. "Did you think you would achieve this many victories in so short a time?" she asked softly.

Harry shook his head, still feeling dazed and happy. If nothing else, this proved that Cupressus's attempts to intimidate his allies in Ireland and slow Harry's vates work there would only backlash on him. "No. I hoped that a few house elves might be free on their present owners' conviction by next year. And even if these are still the house elves of my allies, as opposed to people who hear about what the webs have cost and make the decision from their own conscience, it's more than I expected." He felt, for a moment, as if a green path were opening in front of him, leading into sunlight, and into a country of no trouble.

It was only a dream, of course, and a moment later he rescued the Augurey from the marmalade and started composing his reply. But things were moving. In spite of setbacks and mistakes, some of which he'd put in his own path, things were moving. They would stumble forward, and they would make it, in the end.

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Henrietta often went outside the school grounds to practice the Darkest magic she knew. For one thing, it relieved Minerva of the troubled mind she would have if she had to confront the fact that her Transfiguration professor had—well, certain proclivities for boiled and flayed skin.

For another, the dampening effect of the wards often made her feel like her skin was crawling. The Founders, other than Slytherin, had not wanted Dark Arts practiced in Hogwarts, and Slytherin's influence had long since been purged from most official rooms. Henrietta knew it wasn't true, but she could feel disapproving eyes on her back every time she performed a few mild pain curses. And from what she knew of the Founders' shades Minerva worked with, those disapproving eyes might be literal after all.

There was a third reason as well, but that had been only a hope until today, when Henrietta went into the Forbidden Forest, and thus further from Hogwarts's main grounds than she had been since she

arrived. She drew her wand through the air, practicing slashing curses, pain curses, boiling curses, flaying curses, curses that attacked the mind and made it tear out of the skull. She had captured a number of small animals to use as test subjects. When they ran out, she cast a spell that let her feel the pain of plants and continued.

She caught a glimpse of a robe whisking behind a tree as she cast a spell that she'd heard Death Eaters used on raids, one which made the victim sure he was being raped. Of course, it didn't work nearly as well on a tree, but it translated itself into the equivalent pain of violation—boring by grubs, Henrietta thought—and the mere sound of the incantation was revealing. She smiled faintly. She was glad that Harry trusted her enough now to have granted her license, under the Unbreakable Vow she wore, to cast most Dark magic. The Unforgivables were still forbidden her unless she was using them in self-defense, but that wasn't so bad.

She cast another spell. She caught another glimpse of the robe, and then one of dark eyes she knew well.

"You might as well come out, Evan," she called, as the oak's leaves withered and shrank, and faint, keen wails of pain broke across the surface of her mind like lightning bolts across a livid sky.

A long pause, and he came out. He leaned against the tree he'd been hiding behind, his gaze fixed on her face. Henrietta turned to face him, spinning her wand around in one hand.

Evan Rosier. He wasn't as handsome as the Death Eater she'd raped when he came with two others to convert her to Voldemort's service, and to kill her if they could not convert her. He was thinner, for one thing; more than a decade in Azkaban had done him no good there. His skin was gray, and sagged on his face, though that wasn't as noticeable next to the brightness of his eyes and teeth. He looked half-haunted by shadows, the legacy of Dark magic that slowly closed in and made the user's features run and blur. His dark hair was unkempt and shaggy and straggled down his back like a werewolf's ruff.

“Why did you come to me?” he asked her at last, voice softer than she’d heard it.

At least he’s smart enough to know that I was seeking him out, and allowed him to stay, instead of simply running into him by accident. Henrietta spun her wand again and smiled. “I believe in fate, Evan,” she said. “Don’t you? Certain things happen, and they can’t be denied. We’ve faced each other multiple times, and it’s never come to a conclusion. It will have to, you know, in the end. One of us will have to kill the other. We’re Dark wizards—well, a Dark wizard and a Dark witch. It’s what we do.”

“Or we might kill each other,” said Evan. He came a step forward. Henrietta could see the madness smoldering in the backs of his eyes, but for now it was banked, like a well-tended fire. He was interested enough in what she was saying to focus on her, not on the scraps of poetry chattering in his mind.

Henrietta laughed. “That’s true. That might happen.” She studied him for a moment, eyes narrowed. “Have you been eating, Evan?” she asked critically. “I wouldn’t want to think you’d lose to me because of poor nutrition. There’s no grace in defeating an opponent who can’t fight.”

“I don’t remember.”

“The madness is advancing in you, isn’t it?” Henrietta asked. She had never been sure whether Evan’s insanity came from a specific incident in his life or from using too much Dark magic or from genetic predisposition, but it did seem to have got worse in the last few years. Azkaban would not have helped that, either, though Severus said Evan had wanted to go to the prison and experience the touch of the Dementors.

“It is.” Evan leaned on the tree again, and studied her. “I dream about the night you raped me. When I’m not dreaming of my Lord and what he did to me, or of Harry and what he did to me.”

“What did Harry do to you?” Henrietta could feel her eyebrows crawling up her forehead.

“Set me free,” said Evan. “Cage me, kill me, succumb to me, but do not set me free. I am wild, and wild creatures bite.”

Henrietta could hear the madness growing in his voice again. She suspected she would get neither her final duel nor useful information from him today. His brief lucid interval was over. “You dream about the night I raped you?” she asked, in the final hopes of getting something useful.

“Yes. In the words of the poet, ‘Being so caught up, so mastered by the brute blood of the air, did she put on his knowledge with his power, before the indifferent beak could let her drop?’” Evan shook his head. “I received only one piece of knowledge from you, Henrietta, and it was how to hate.”

“I thought you hated before that.”

Evan threw his head back and howled his laughter, and Henrietta winced. His voice was cracking. He really had been living in the wild like a werewolf, eating nuts and leaves, probably, and little else. “I hated,” he said. “Everything. But the world was a game. After that, I hated you, and I had opponents.” He twisted his head to the side and watched her like an owl for a moment. “I can accept your view of fate. We shall meet and kill each other someday. But not today.”

“Not today,” Henrietta agreed softly, and then felt in her robe pocket. Evan was back around the tree in a moment, but Henrietta finished lifting out the thing she held anyway: a raspberry pie she’d had the house elves at Hogwarts make for her. It was no longer hot, but still warm. She set it carefully on the forest floor. “This is for you, Evan, and it has no poison in it.”

He put his head around the tree and watched her. Henrietta held his eyes for a moment. So much madness in them—burned to a low ember right now, but it would rear back up and blaze like a wildfire in the end. She would have what she wanted.

She Apparated back to Hogwarts, but she saw him come forward, slowly, step by step, boots slipping in the mud, to accept the pie.

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“Thank you for coming, Narcissa.”

His wife raised her eyebrows as she sat down in the chair opposite his. Lucius knew just how she would cross her legs, how she would fold her hands on top of them, how her blonde hair would coil around her neck when she turned her head. Mannerisms like that did not change in a few months apart. “I wish I knew why I had agreed to come, Lucius. What is this momentous news you have for me?” Her voice was cool and hard, like frost on stone, and Lucius knew that it was right to say this to her, if only for the pleasure of melting that frost for a moment.

“I am revoking the disownment,” he said casually. “Draco is once more a Malfoy, and the legal and blood heir to the family’s assets.”

Narcissa’s face drained of color, and she actually let out a sharp, “What?” before she regained control of herself. Then she said, “I will believe this when I see it, Lucius. You would never yield up your pride like this, unless Draco had given you a similar concession or a greater one, and I know that he has not.”

“Why not?” Lucius asked, to see if she would say what he thought she would say.

Sure enough, she did. “He would have consulted with me before he took such a drastic step.”

Lucius nodded. “Yes, he would have. But circumstances have changed, Narcissa. I made the decision to disown Draco because I believed that Harry’s rebellion was doomed, and that Draco was not strong enough to be the Malfoy heir I wanted him to be. Now I believe that Harry has succeeded in most of his goals—the most important ones—and Draco has proven himself strong enough.”

Narcissa snorted at him. “And it only took you until four months after Draco’s Declaration to realize this?” It was the sixteenth of April, and thus slightly less than four months since the Declaration at Midwinter,

but Lucius decided that he would be kind and refrain from pointing out her error.

“I wished to be sure it would last, and not be a simple slip into error again,” said Lucius. “Instead, I find that Draco grows stronger and more worthy of being my heir every day since.” And that was so, if what he heard from his contacts in the Ministry and in Hogwarts was true. Lucius could admit he felt pride, if pride like a mountaintop, pride like Narcissa’s voice.

“I wish to see the papers confirming this,” Narcissa said, her eyes glimmering frozen lakes.

Lucius had just received the documents from his solicitor that morning, in fact. He fetched them from the study, amused but not surprised to see that Narcissa was keeping her wand, hidden in her sleeve, trained on him the entire time, and gave them into her hands. She also cast spells to check them for contact poison before she actually grasped and looked them over, he noted.

Narcissa shuffled through them, and then sat back and stared at him, as if trying to grasp his purpose.

“What is the matter?” Lucius asked, deciding it was at least worth asking the question. He could not predict every nuance of Narcissa’s behavior. He had given up on doing that. He did think that this move was transparent enough that she should accept it for what it was: his attempt to make sure he had an heir who could take over the Malfoy properties and monies. That she did not know why he would want one now was not a problem. No one would know.

“Why, Lucius?” she asked quietly. “Why the disownment in the first place, if you are doing this now? Why reverse it, when you did it in the first place?”

“That is information I might share with you if you were to agree to return to your proper place,” said Lucius, grasping and holding her gaze. “At my table, in the chair beside mine, in my bed.”

Narcissa's lip curled. Very slightly, of course, but it was answer enough.

Lucius nodded. "Then I shall not tell you, Narcissa. I will, if you wish, swear under Veritaserum that the Malfoy legacy is not a poisoned apple. I leave Draco no deadly bargains, no crippling debts. He shall have the fortune and the majority of the houses as whole as I can transfer them."

"Why?" Narcissa asked, but she whispered it this time.

He looked her in the eye, and ached with the desire to reveal the truth to her. But that would be foolishness. She was not of him, not now. She was a proud and independent and beautiful creature, light and pale as a white leopard in the winter sunlight. She was loyal to Draco, and not to him, and it was his own fault that had made her so.

At long last, Lucius thought, he was at peace with himself and his mistakes. He had scorned the emotion before, but it was possible that Light wizards and other proponents of conscience were clever when they spoke of it.

"Farewell, Narcissa," he said, and pressed the documents into her hands. "You may take these with you, if you like. Show them to Draco. Discuss them with your own solicitor, to make sure they are genuine."

She rose from her chair, still staring at him, and retreated out of the room in a slow, baffled way. Lucius waited until he heard the whoosh of the Floo that told him she had gone.

Then he turned back to his study, to resume his reading.

The simple fact of the matter was that he knew he would fall, now, soon. The truth of his crimes would come out. When it did, Lucius could see only three possible outcomes.

Harry would drain his magic for Lucius's crimes against his parents and for violating the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow.

Indigena snorted as she watched Falco fly away. She didn't know the whole of what he'd come to talk to her Lord about this time, since they had, as usual, sent her away during the meat of the conversation, but she knew the majority of his plan. He would attack on Walpurgis, with the wild Dark behind him, and he imagined this would be enough to win the battle with Harry. Or perhaps he imagined it would be enough to make Harry Declare for Light. Indigena didn't think that Falco knew what he truly wanted any more. He had simply come far enough along the road, and felt responsible enough for the British wizarding world, that he couldn't fathom abandoning his supposed plan. Indigena wondered idly who would actually get hurt on Walpurgis. Perhaps both Falco and Harry would survive it, though she hoped not.

"Indigena."

She descended the stairs into her Lord's lair, and paused when she realized that he was sitting up, the flesh-snake wound around his waist, its eyes fixed on her. "My lord?" she asked tentatively. He looked more lively than usual, but that could be deceiving. Sometimes he looked the wildest right before he collapsed and had to retreat into his own mind due to the hole in his magical core.

"We will be moving tonight, Indigena," said her Lord, and his tongue flickered across his lipless mouth, "to the sanctuary that Parkinson prepared for us."

Indigena knew she couldn't hide her surprise, so she didn't try. "May I ask why?" she said. "My Lord?" she added hastily.

"It soon will not matter that he knows where we are," said Voldemort, and chuckled, a sound like scales rasping on stone. "He will not survive Walpurgis Night. My heir will destroy him. And this burrow is a potential danger to us now, after the attack on the ring's house. Harry may return and think to look for us near my father's house." There was a depth of hatred in father that nearly matched his hatred for Harry, Indigena thought; it would not surprise her if he had used Tom Riddle's death to split part of his soul into the Slytherin ring Horcrux. "As well, the accumulated magical energies in this burrow are making my meditation difficult. My hand will soon be ready to move, my

Thorn Bitch, and I wish to be in a place more special and symbolic to me than this when that happens. I was conceived here, but my mortal birth was in London, and my truest birth in the place we go. I wish to sojourn there.”

“Yes, my Lord,” said Indigena, thinking, for a moment, of the difficulties of transporting Voldemort to his new home more than anything else. Then his words crashed home into her ears, and she looked up sharply. “My Lord? Does this mean that we are almost ready?”

“We are, my Indigena.” His snake hissed to echo the Dark Lord’s laughter. “My spy has given me much interesting information on the state of Hogwarts in the last few days, as much as he ever gave me about Woodhouse. No one thinks of poor Lord Voldemort any more, no one thinks him a threat. And Harry’s politics are becoming much too settled as things are. And my control of my hands and feet grows stronger every day. When I strike, when I take the first of those he has loved, it will be little more than a month and a half hence.”

Early June, Indigena translated, and trembled a bit. “And I shall have the part in the strike that you promised me, my Lord?” she whispered.

“Of course, my dear one. It was your plan.” He smiled at her.

Indigena closed her eyes, and tried not to feel overwhelmed. Her only weapon for so long—she thought of the books she had read over and over—had been parchment. Now she would finally take up her wand in her Lord’s cause.

She was a bit sorry she would cast the wizarding world into screaming chaos when she did, but it came not from any personal animosity, but an honor debt. There were few wizards alive who would not understand that, if they truly thought about it.

“Go, Indigena,” Voldemort said, obviously knowing from her face what she needed. “Walk in your garden. Say farewell to the flowers there.”

Out she went, from the dense, dark burrow into the open air and the declining sunlight. It was nearly sunset on the third weekend in April,

and she stood there, just breathing, watching as the day, slightly longer than yesterday, depended and then dropped. The scent of the tame soil, the living soil, the strong soil, came in at her nose, and birds chirped somewhere far away.

She had seen in the Daily Prophet that morning, when she went in disguise to a small wizarding village, that Harry had met with Elder Juniper of the Wizengamot and received the Order of Merlin. She had smiled then, because she was fond of Harry. She had thought it would be the best news she received all day.

Now it was not, and the endless waiting was nearly done at last.

She breathed, and thrilled to the sense of being alive.

Chapter Eighty-Two: Day of Glory

Harry studied the ring closely, then nodded and put it in his pocket. It would do. If he had done what he was supposed to do in the first place, and studied the joining rituals individually, as Draco had done, then he probably could have found something even better, but at least he'd been paying attention this time. "Thank you, Connor."

His brother hesitated for a moment, staring at him. That made Harry, in turn, hesitate to leave the sixth-year boys' bedroom in Gryffindor Tower. "What's wrong?"

Connor swallowed, then said, "Are you ready for this? Both tomorrow and—what the night will bring?"

Harry smiled reassuringly. He'd told Connor about the message he'd received from Scrimgeour a month ago now, warning him that his nameless source of information on Falco believed he would attack on Walpurgis Night. Since Harry also believed that, and he didn't think he could have kept battle preparations concealed from Connor anyway, he'd shared the information with his brother. Connor normally wouldn't attend Walpurgis Night given his Declaration and the fact that Harry was sure the prophecy meant for Draco to stand beside him and fend off Falco's attack, but he had offered to come with them, now, several times. "I'm ready, Connor. A year ago? No, I don't think I would have been." It made him smile more widely, to think how nervous he'd been about that Walpurgis ritual, his and Draco's first. "I've had time to get used to it now."

"If you're sure you don't need me," said Connor, with a tiny nod.

"I would like you along," said Harry. "But this celebration is supposed to be a private time for Dark wizards, and the ritual—well, it will be shared, but Draco and I need to be in the center of it."

Connor cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. "I'm not entirely looking forward to the sharing part."

“I hope you will,” said Harry vaguely, and then waved his hand and departed from the Tower. Connor watched him with intent eyes all the way to the door, but made no other effort to keep him there.

Harry stopped walking once he was a few floors down from the Tower and examined the ring in his hand. This ritual, the Giving of Gifts, said that Harry needed to return the gesture Draco had made for him the year before, and give Draco some sign or signal of their partnership—ideally, an heirloom from his family line. Given that Harry had rejected the Potter name and his mother was Muggleborn, he was not entirely sure what to do about it. Regulus had offered him Black artifacts, of course, but given that Draco was half-Black himself, it had seemed vaguely incestuous. This part of the dance was about the joining of different facets of the partners’ selves, not the same ones.

In the end, he had asked Connor if he could look at some rings inherent to the Potter line, and had chosen a golden one etched with lions and set with a topaz. What he planned to do with it would, he hoped, alter it enough to fulfill the confines of the ritual.

He ducked into an alcove as a prefect’s footsteps scraped by, waited until she’d moved away, and then snapped the topaz out of its setting. He put it on a windowsill, spent a few moments composing and deepening himself, and opened his eyes to focus his gaze on the ring.

The gold began to soften and sag as he watched, turning slowly molten, but not hot. Just—soft. Harry held up his hands and parted them, and the ring spun in the middle of them, losing its shape, dripping in strands of metal that floated up to touch his fingers like the silk of a spiderweb. He moved his hands over each other, and thought of what he wanted to do.

He was becoming more comfortable working with his magic this way, the way that Lord-level magic was supposed to work. Jing-Xi had confirmed as much when he asked her. He could act through traditional spells, but they sometimes made inadequate casings for his power or wouldn’t let him achieve the effect he wanted. Outside those spells, he had to use the hammer of his will to drive himself forward, rather as someone did when completing the Animagus

transformation. It was tiring, but it was also more likely to result in what he wished.

Now he wished to use the gold of the Potter ring as a base to create something that would be unique to him, still an artifact of his family line, but, more to the point, an artifact of him. He could see the general shape of the ring in his mind, but deciding the symbols to put on it was harder.

Then he smiled, and presented the image of the ring in his mind's eye, and pushed towards it.

His magic surrounded him, not spreading out around his body like a pool, but thrumming through his veins. Harry could feel it building as pressure behind his eyeballs, in fact, a steady impress of song and blood and violent motion. He was climbing a mountain. It could be done, but it made his breath come short and the urge to vomit increase. And all through the contrary sensations, he had to keep seeing the ring, imagining, thinking of it.

Press, and suddenly the overwhelming urge came to him to clasp his hands together, so he did.

A blaze of white light gathered all the golden strands up, and Harry, squinting, thought he could see a small, hollow sphere forming in the middle of them. Threads clasped each other and interwove. If he was right, the new ring would not be a solid band, as the other had been, but a twined one, a braided one. That was all right, if he could still have what he wanted.

His magic surged up beneath and carried him. Harry felt a moment's thrill. He worked in partnership with his power, not commanded it, when it was like this—the way that Jing-Xi had told him it should be. His power carried him like a horse, and while he could direct it with reins and halter, there was still a great deal of strength and speed under him that might decide to do something else at any moment.

Kick, and soar, and descend, and then they were in a new realm, so that Harry felt as if small pieces of himself were being woven into the ring. He accepted the feeling. He didn't know if it were literal, but if it

was, it just meant that the gift would be even more part of himself, and even more fit for Draco. The gold had been held by Potters, but reforged by him, who had no last name.

The strands shimmered and shook and grew slimmer. Harry felt tiny points sprouting from them, tiny indentations pressed into them, tiny parts of them extend and wrap with other tiny parts. The sensation increased until he didn't know if he had his own body any more, or if he were part of this ring, made for the fourth finger on Draco's right hand.

And then he was back in his body, spun out, dizzy, staring down at the new ring that lay in his left palm. Every single braided strand was a lynx, slim body twisted around, reaching ahead with outstretched paws to grasp the one in front and trailing a tail behind for the next to hold, heads lifted and wise ears pricked. The setting for the topaz still waited at the top.

Harry solemnly snapped the stone back into place, and then slid it into his pocket. He knew what he was supposed to do in the Giving of Gifts from having actually studied the ritual this time. Unfortunately, Draco also did, and would be angling for an early glimpse of his gift if at all possible. Harry didn't intend to give him one.

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Try as he might, Draco had not seen Harry's gift for him before they went to bed, which meant that he awakened on the morning of the Giving of Gifts not knowing what it would be.

He had lain awake last night debating what it could be, when he wasn't worried about the battle with Falco that Harry believed would come after nightfall and how they were going to accomplish it. There was so little that could count as an artifact of Harry's family. Had he chosen something Black? Something Snape? Well, come to that, Professor Snape probably didn't have any heirlooms, either, since his father had been a Muggle—Draco felt his lip curl, but it was mostly habit—and his mother had probably sold anything she had to help herself survive.

He lay next to Harry, and fought to keep from stirring. The moment he made any strong movement, the ritual would begin, and he wanted he and Harry to begin that motion together.

Harry opened his eyes at last, and smiled agreeably, sleepily, at him. "Good morning," he whispered, and grasped and kissed the back of Draco's hand. Draco gave him a smile that he hoped was coy, but Harry laughed, even though, without his glasses, Draco knew he couldn't see it well.

"You'll receive your gift in a short time, Draco," he said.

"You won't actually wait until noon, will you?" Draco hated how disappointed his voice sounded, but the requirement of waiting until noon to present this gift wasn't a major part of the ritual—more advice, like the terms that said the betrothed couple should wait until the end of the dance to share a bed. He had assumed Harry would disobey the rule.

"In this case, I want to." Harry considered him solemnly. "You don't really mind, do you?"

Draco swallowed an objection and shook his head. Harry was supposed to be the one guiding and leading in this ritual, since Draco had guided and led in the one last year, and had been the one to actually propose the three-year dance. He had shown an inclination to read up on it in the last few weeks and actually research what he was supposed to do, which had made Draco satisfied in a way that nothing else so far in their courtship had.

And he had kept his life safe for a month, as he had promised. Harry really had made an attempt to learn his lesson this time.

"Good." Harry's face relaxed, and he kissed Draco one more time, on the cheek. "Ready?"

Draco nodded slowly. His brain felt larger than normal, like liquid sloshing around in his skull. He and Harry inched away from each other, and then stood up and climbed out of bed at the same moment.

Draco felt the Giving of Gifts begin. His mind went leaping out from what seemed to be the sides of his head, through his ears, curling like pearly liquid across their bedroom and into the Slytherin common room. He caught blurred glimpses of familiar faces, the fire, the dungeon walls, and then his perceptions flattened and streamed upward, lashing viciously into place.

Draco heard Harry give a slight moan, and guessed that his mind had stretched further, since none of Draco's family were actually in the school. He put out a blind hand, and Harry caught and squeezed it. Draco leaned against him, gasping a little, his brain reeling as he tried to adjust to being mostly in his own body but also there, in someone else's head, with random flashes of their reality intruding at random times.

This part of the ritual was designed to link the joined partners to their in-laws, and smooth out any problems between them by letting them share each other's mindset for a day. Both Connor and Draco's parents had accepted that this would happen, Draco reminded himself dimly.

He had not known how intense it would be. In the back of his mind, he supposed he had thought it would be like his own possession, where he could control what was happening. But he retained awareness of his own body and position. And he couldn't control it when a pair of eyes opened and stared at a canopy of red and gold.

Connor rolled over and sat up. Draco gasped a little at the feeling of an alien body, but more at the content of his thoughts.

He was—

It was so simple, his world. It was much like Draco's world, before he had changed his mind about certain fundamental parts of it, like the innate superiority of purebloods. Connor knew whom he liked and whom he disliked, and now that he was not playing the part of the Boy-Who-Lived, he saw little need to extend his sympathies unless he had to. At the same time, it was fringed with soft and moving shadows, what he called the noticing, which meant he picked up on other people's moods and preoccupations and started seeing them

as more important, because they existed in the world, too, even as he did.

It wasn't something Connor was comfortable with, since he suspected it meant he was becoming an adult, and he tried to hide from it whenever possible.

The perceptions ended for the moment, and Draco staggered, leaning hard on Harry. A moment later, he opened his eyes and peered at his partner.

Harry had his eyes open already, and gave him a strained smile. "Ready?" he asked, holding out his arm. They'd both showered last night, so as to be able not to waste time this morning, or risk falling over in the loo from a sudden and dizzying burst of another person's thoughts.

"I'm going to be appreciating your brother before the day is out," Draco said in a faint tone, resting his hand on Harry's arm. "I'm not sure that I could ever be ready for that."

Harry laughed, and something in the laugh made Draco turn to look at him. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Seeing through your father's eyes right now," Harry murmured, striding across the bedroom and managing to open the door more, Draco thought, by memory than anything else. "It's very strange. I never realized how much we do think alike, or at least how much we thought alike before I changed my mind and rejected my training."

"He's a Dark pureblood," said Draco simply. "Your parents largely raised you like one, Harry, whether or not they meant to. That's why we got along so well at first."

"No, that was your doing."

Draco started to respond, but stopped at the dazzling smile Harry was giving him. It was a sidelong thing, from the corner of his mouth, and Harry's eyes were still filled with whatever he was seeing of Lucius and Narcissa, and it was absent, and it was loving, and it was

the most beautiful expression Harry had ever shown him. It accepted Draco's place in his past, even, instead of blaming him for the persistent sticking to Harry's side he'd done in their first two years.

Draco decided he could wait until noon and endure the perceptions of Connor Potter after all.

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Connor chewed a crust of toast thoughtfully, and wondered if Draco could feel it when he did that.

He was feeling some effects from the ritual, too, but they were smaller than what Draco would be experiencing. Now and then the memory of a pureblood dance he had never known would return to him, and it was like something he had only temporarily forgotten. Once or twice he had had the dizzying feeling of sitting at the wrong table, and there was flashes of excitement that he refused to look at much further.

If this helped Draco, it was all to the good, as far as Connor was concerned. He had done more to accept his brother-in-law so far than Draco had done to accept him. The Giving of Gifts might help Draco learn to live with him.

He ate another piece of toast and sneaked a glance at his brother. Harry had said he would be fine, both with the ring and the fight with Falco tonight. Connor was not sure. He would have liked to have been there to help.

Except...

Well, he couldn't. He was Declared Light, and he could feel the hovering Dark of Walpurgis as a faint, indistinct threat when he felt it at all. He wouldn't be welcome at whatever celebration Draco and Harry would attend, and which Falco planned to attack. This ritual, the Giving of Gifts, was the only thing he had ever known in detail about what Harry did on this night.

An elbow poked him in the side. Connor turned to Hermione and blinked intelligently, especially when he saw that Hermione was still buried in her book and had no reason for poking him.

"Ginny's asked you to pass the marmalade twice now, Connor," Hermione pointed out.

"Sorry." Connor handed the jar down the table, and Ginny nodded at him before smearing it over her toast. His gaze went straight back to Harry and Draco as if nailed there, though, and he knew why.

He knew why Harry concerned himself with Walpurgis so much. He might not have been a Dark wizard, but he had a commitment to celebrating with them because he hung between both Dark and Light. That should mean that he could come to Light celebrations as well, though.

Now Connor just had to think of a holiday he'd like to share with his brother. Their birthday wouldn't work, even though it was near the old celebration of Lammas, because that was the day of a joining ritual between Harry and Draco.

Midsummer might do, he decided slowly. He had read a little about Midsummer traditions last year, before Peter had decided it was more important that he study other things. And Merlin knew that Harry could use better memories of that day. Losing his hand on it one year and fighting a battle the next was not guaranteed to make him like it.

Connor hummed under his breath, pleased with himself. He hoped that Draco could feel the pleasure, and knew the cause of it. Just because he liked Draco now, and had accepted that the other boy would play a phenomenally large part in Harry's life, didn't mean he had to stop teasing him.

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Harry ran a hand through his hair and shook his head as he and Draco headed towards the outer courtyard.

He had learned more from Lucius's mind than he would ever have suspected. The man really was going to make Draco his heir again, something Harry and Draco had both assumed was only a joke when Narcissa told them about it, papers notwithstanding. Harry had not tried to find out why—Lucius had only agreed to participate in the ritual if Harry did not probe too deeply into his mind and his secrets, so he was floating on the surface, away from anything Lucius did not want him to know—but it was real.

He had changed.

And his world was colder and dimmer than Harry had ever suspected it was, or, where bright, was lit only by the kind of light that gleamed on and through icebergs. Harry could not help feeling a bit sorry for him. Family and pride and power were everything, tinted, a little, by love for that family and the respect for power that Draco had told him about, or warmed to sea-blue or soft green by some unexpectedly philosophical thoughts like the difference between power, strength, and might. Harry had a much better idea now of what it had done to Lucius when Narcissa left him, and when Draco turned his back on him to follow Harry.

Not that that made those things any less Lucius's own fault, of course.

He and Draco stopped in the middle of the courtyard, and turned to face each other. Harry looked around. Though he knew the wild Dark was hunting behind the stars, humming in readiness for its descent and the Walpurgis celebration tonight, the overwhelming impression he received was one of sunlight. The clouds were trotting swiftly as chariots towards the west after an early rain, and the sun's weak flower in the midst of that was the stronger for its setting, not at all diminished.

It was right, Harry knew, turning back to Draco. The Giving of Gifts opened a new year and turned the old year back on itself. It insisted that the partner who had been more passive last Walpurgis take the lead this time, and if Dark had been worshipped, now was the time of Light.

They were wise, those ancient wizards, Harry thought, as he pulled the golden, lynx-made ring out of his robe pocket. They knew that both Light and Dark have a place in our lives, even if they were Dark themselves. I wish the people now alive had one tenth as much wisdom.

Draco frankly gaped on seeing the ring. "Where did you get that?" he whispered.

Harry merely smiled at him. The words he was about to speak, adapted from a set of ritual phrases he'd found in one of Draco's books, would give him the answer.

"The gold comes from my family," he said. "The family of blood and birth, the Potter line. But I made the ring." He paused a moment to let Draco imagine the magic that must have gone into that, then held it up, so that if Draco had missed the lynxes that made them up, he could see them now. "The lynx is associated with keen sight, and with guardianship," he said. "May I never lack in either duty towards you."

He leaned forward and slipped the ring around the fourth finger of Draco's right hand. His own silver ring, a Black heirloom, shimmered brightly. Draco stood looking down at the gift for a moment, in a daze.

Then he looked up swiftly and reached out for Harry, grasping his shoulders and pulling him into a kiss. Harry resisted, until he could guide it for himself, and choose exactly how hard their tongues and lips should meet.

He felt a tender protectiveness, less frantic than the fear he'd felt for Draco's life in Rosier's hands but nearly as strong, surge up in him. He could guard Draco, then, and it didn't have to be a matter of preventing him from doing what he wanted to do, or exercising tyranny over him. What he did was not compulsion. If Harry took the dominant position at times, that did not mean that he was ruling others inappropriately, or that he had become a Lord. Sometimes, he was the stronger one and better-suited to protect and defend, that was all.

His wonder at the realization was such that he almost missed Draco saying hoarsely, "Tease."

Harry raised a brow, and then realized Draco was panting, flushed, more affected by the simple kiss than Harry was. Harry smiled. Well. He should be, since I'm the guide right now.

"No tease," he said brightly. "Just thinking about myself right now, as well as you." He'd done that last weekend, too, when he'd met with Elder Juniper and said he would be making his acceptance of the Order of Merlin public, which he thought had taken the older wizard by surprise. And that hadn't damaged him, or made him evil. The feeling that filled him right then was such that he had to keep from bouncing on his toes as he reminded Draco, "When nightfall comes, then you can choose to go to bed with me if you really want to."

To his surprise, Draco immediately shook his head. "No," he murmured. "We have a battle to fight, you and I. I helped you face Dumbledore, and I'm going to face Falco with you. But I'll think of some other gift to give you before we go, Harry."

Harry gently touched his cheek. "Good."

They turned and went back into the school. Draco kept studying the ring on his finger. Harry continued to expect some comment along the lines of gold being a Gryffindor color, but apparently the gold was also rich enough—or the craftsmanship of Harry's magic was beautiful enough—to impress him.

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Narcissa stood gazing thoughtfully into the fire. She had come to stay with Regulus in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place for the nonce, which translated to "until her cousin was able to sleep without potions." Regulus had sulkily insisted he was fine. Harry's quiet talk with Narcissa had said otherwise, and Narcissa was inclined to believe Harry, on the balance of the evidence.

Right now, though, Regulus had been napping for an hour, with nary a nightmare to his name, and that left Narcissa free to think and reason through the many things that this day meant to her.

In a few short hours, she would be going to a Walpurgis celebration—but not a normal one, for they all expected Falco Parkinson to interrupt halfway through. Harry would have his allies there to defend him, but none knew if they could, given the presence of the prophecy.

In a few short hours, she might be facing battle with a Dark Lord, a man she could have been swearing allegiance to under other circumstances.

In a few short hours, her son's fifth joining ritual would be done, binding him and Harry together virtually for life. Someone else could still interfere, in the sense of proposing marriage or joining to one of the partners, until the Halloween ritual—as the seventh of the thirteen, it was the fulcrum on which the others swung—but Narcissa considered Harry her son-in-law already.

In a few short hours, she would lose her sense of what went on behind Harry's eyes, which the Giving of Gifts had currently inspired.

She leaned her head on the mantle and closed her eyes. When she did, then she could catch odd pulses of Harry's thoughts, fragments of his consciousness whirring through her own like startled birds. She doubted that Harry had looked as deeply into her own head, or wanted to look. He had no problems with her as he did with Lucius. He would think he understood her already.

Narcissa at least hoped that he had seen she loved him.

But she used her lesser access to his thoughts to probe while she could, to understand.

Broken webs and burned bridges and a mind rebuilt from scratch several times were her dominant impressions so far. And so was a sense of self-worth that pranced on the edge of an abyss. Narcissa wondered if the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, or the werewolves, or

others who depended on Harry for strength and guidance, realized how very fragile their vates was at times.

She had been grateful before, passionately grateful, that Draco had Harry. He was what Draco had wanted, the boy, and then the man, for whom Narcissa had taken risks, and the cause and the person for whom Draco had pushed himself to become more than a small seed growing in his father's shadow. Draco was grander and finer than he ever would have been if he had not met Harry. So Narcissa believed.

And now she was just as passionately grateful that Harry had Draco. Neither of them was necessarily strong on their own; her son, her beloved son, could collapse into a spoiled brat, and Harry into a pile of shards. But together, at least, they supported each other like a pair of entwined trees.

Not that the battle, and Harry's existence in general, and thus Draco's existence, did not still seem like dancing on a volcano.

"Dark, keep them safe," Narcissa whispered, and would have liked to believe that somewhere she heard a great wolf howl in answer.

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Draco had decided on his gift for Harry a few hours before nightfall, and it was torture to wait patiently until they had finished dinner in the Great Hall and were on their way back to the Slytherin common room to give it to him. He tugged gently at Harry's hand, drawing him towards a sheltered alcove, and Harry went without question. Draco hid his eye-roll. For the most part, Harry had handled the demands of the Giving of Gifts well. He should know better than to simply give in when someone else hauled on him, though—or at least, when Draco hauled on him.

"What is it?" Harry asked, as he turned and faced Draco across the small expanse of stone floor between them.

"There's something you should know," said Draco, and wished he had his wand out to hold and make himself feel better. The consciousness that they were going to battle in a few hours,

accentuated by the uneasiness that all Dark wizards felt on this day of the wild Dark, put him on edge. Of course, he would probably have simply twirled the wand in his hand and revealed his own nervousness. "Something I certainly never guessed before today, so I couldn't have told it to you."

By now, Harry's eyebrows had risen all the way, and his mouth had tightened with concern. "Draco," he whispered. "What is it?"

Draco met his eyes, and realized Harry thought he was about to say something awful. Of course, he wouldn't stain the day of their glory in such a way, but Harry didn't know that; awful gifts, home truths, were just as legitimate a gift as any other kind in this ritual.

He leaned forward and kissed Harry gently, then pulled back before it could be seen as violating the constraints of the ritual. "It's nothing bad," he said. "Just—unexpected."

Harry motioned for him to go on.

"I think your brother's all right," Draco muttered.

Harry responded with a great peal of laughter richer than any Draco had heard from him in months. Draco managed to pout, the way Harry would think he had to in the wake of being laughed at, although he wanted to smile, or perhaps stare in fascination. Harry leaned forward again and kissed him on the nose, then enveloped him in a hug.

"Connor caught me after Charms to say something of the same kind," he said. "I'm very happy that you can both get along, Draco."

In the simple statement, Draco heard an ocean's worth of relief, and he sighed himself, resting his face gently against Harry's neck. Harry would get to have what he should always have had: a loving family. And Draco and Connor would make some effort to get along, since they were both part of it.

Harry might not be able to express that in words. It was all right. Draco knew how he felt.

They stood there a moment longer, and then heard Snape's quick, hurried footsteps. They broke apart just as he came around the corner and stopped on seeing them with a jerk that made his robes swirl behind him.

"Do you both have your wands?" he asked them.

"Yes, Severus," Harry said, though Draco knew for a fact that he mostly preferred to work without a wand now. "Are you ready?"

Snape inclined his head. He would not have let Harry go to battle alone, Draco thought, no matter how much he might hate the uncontrolled nature of the Walpurgis celebrations.

"Then we go," said Harry, and started towards the common room again. Draco followed just behind him. Not really noticing what he was doing any more than he had noticed the smile this afternoon, Harry reached out and put an arm around his shoulders, tugging him towards him.

Draco could feel Snape's stare. He put his head up and ignored it. He was quite happy to walk within Harry's protection for a short time before fighting beside him, if only because of what it promised for the end of their ritual and their future.

And we will have a future. I say so.

Chapter Eighty-Three: Night of Terror

Falco came from the sky, with the Dark running behind him.

It had taken the form of a huge black wolf, which Falco supposed was as acceptable as any other. He was a Dark Lord now, and Dark Lords should find pleasure in ravaging beasts—and this wolf resembled a werewolf more than a wild, natural creature—and the color black. That he could not take much pleasure from them was a failing in him. But he fully intended to die tonight anyway. The plan was that he would not die until he had forced Harry to Declare for Light.

And that plan, itself, was simple. Falco would inflict a wound on Harry that he needed more than his own magic to heal. To draw on such a source of power, he would have to reach for either Light or Dark, and the Dark would be fully occupied helping Falco. The Light would have to enter the world, and for it to do so on Walpurgis Night would require either a sacrifice, such as Harry had offered of his phoenix last Midwinter, or a Declaration. He knew which one Harry was more likely to choose.

There were several things that could go wrong. Falco did not intend to let them go wrong. If nothing else, the Dark would help him, such as destroying those spells of lesser power that Harry might try to use. It had taken the form of not just a wolf, but one with his own green eyes, showing him that it honored him.

Falco glanced at the wolf one more time, and then turned swiftly back to stare.

For a moment, just a moment, he had thought there was a silver lightning bolt cutting the intense black fur of the wolf's forehead. The mark resembled the scar on Harry's brow too much for Falco's comfort.

Then he realized the mark came from a shroud of silver light the wolf was pulling with it, drawing strength from the stars and the dark spaces between them where their beams wandered. Falco shook his head and faced the ground again, telling himself not to be ridiculous.

The Dark snarled eagerly beside him. Falco reached out and put one hand on its neck, feeling the incredible power surging beneath the soft mockery of fur.

And feeling that—well. It would have been inhuman for him not to feel a bit excited, not to look forward to the expression on Harry's face when they both curved down.

On they traveled, towards the point where the immense, mysterious backroads of the Dark opened into the mortal night of the British wizarding world.

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Harry was already looking around when Millicent landed them at the Walpurgis celebration, the largest concentration of Dark magic in Britain. He relaxed when he saw no sign of Falco yet, and then gave a second, longer look around, because what he did see was bizarre enough, he had to admit.

The magic always chose silver-and-green destinations for them—most of the time, Harry thought, entirely created of the magic, or perhaps modified from their normal appearances. He had been in a smooth green hollow where a silver fire burned, and in a field of lilies and grass, and in a forest last year, when he chased the wild Dark in the form of a white stag. This one was stranger than the others.

It looked to be a desert, with slick, dark green rocks twisting in every direction, forming shapes that maddeningly remained on the edge of recognition, very much the way that clouds did. Gleams of silver struck from the top of the rocks, gleamed from crannies under them, danced on the occasional flat surface as if the dark green were not stone at all but polished metal. No matter where Harry looked, there was silver light, and his eyes finally made out a ring of stars, low and clustered around the horizon, taking every opportunity to shine between the stones. It was—well, it was eerie.

He waited for some sense of the wild Dark to overcome him, since it usually changed the celebrants' moods, but nothing happened. He felt the same mixture of fear and anger and quiet confidence that he

had when he walked out of the magic of the stone Millicent had used to bring them.

It was impossible to think he wasn't affected. Easier, perhaps, to believe that the wild Dark's mood and his coincided.

Harry nibbled his lip. I don't know if I dare believe that, though. I have no idea if we're going to get that much help from the wild Dark.

"Harry!"

He looked up, and felt the sweat of relief prickling around his body. Someone had lit a fire, and many wizards and witches stood around it, warming their hands against the intense chill air of the desert. As Harry hurried towards them, snow began to drift down around them—shattered flakes of pure silver, of course. When they landed on his skin, Harry shivered and cast a warming charm. It didn't seem to help.

He had the impression that the stars were staring at him through the gaps in the rock, awaiting some recognition, some challenge, some conclusion. The dark spaces between them rippled when he watched. Harry hissed between his teeth. Falco will come from the sky. I'm certain of it.

Draco and Snape were a few steps behind him, no more, when he arrived at the fire. Many of the faces there were unfamiliar, but a small contingent of wizards and witches who had drawn off by themselves came forward to meet him. Harry recognized most of his Dark-Declared allies, and exchanged nods with them. Honoria's eyes were shining with excitement, and Thomas seemed more interested in sifting the sand beneath his feet to find out what it was made of than in paying attention to an upcoming battle, but the others were grim.

"Do you think we'll be able to help you?" Ignifer asked softly, so that the strangers could not overhear.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. The prophecy might not tolerate interference at all, or it might accept a low level." As if speaking of it had called his attention to it, he could feel the prophecy now, a sweet

charged thunder, prowling around the distant ring of stars like a living thing in a cage. Well, it is a living thing, almost, with the way it shifts. “On the other hand, it let Dumbledore do almost what he wanted last year, until the moment when Draco arrived and the actual prophecy began to work. There’ll have to be a different sequence of events this time, since I’m ready and waiting for Falco.”

He kept to himself his fear that the prophecy would allow Falco to hurt someone dear to him before it looped him and Draco in to begin the destruction of the second Dark Lord. If it had happened one time, it might happen the next time. He would have forbidden his allies to come if this had been any other time but Walpurgis, he thought—and then he pictured what would have happened if he’d tried that, and sighed. No, he wouldn’t have been able to do it, not when they had their free wills.

“The attack will be from above, I think,” he said, reaching back and feeling the reassuring weight of Draco’s shoulder beneath his hand. “Do you see the way the sky is rippling beneath the stars?”

“More than that,” said Hawthorn suddenly. “Can you smell the scent of the wolf approaching closer and closer?”

Harry glanced at her in startlement. She’d risen until she stood on her toes, her head back, her nose working. It was only a few days past the full moon, so Harry supposed he wasn’t surprised that she could still use a werewolf’s sense of smell to good effect, but—

A wolf? Like the one that greeted me the night when I freed the thestrals? Like the one that tried to take me into the Dark the night I lost my hand?

What is the wild Dark playing at?

He probably wouldn’t know until it was too late, Harry had to concede, and mentally, he forced himself to live with that. “I can’t smell the wolf, no,” he told Hawthorn. “Does it resemble a werewolf pack or an ordinary wolf?”

Two more sniffs, and Hawthorn settled back on her heels, looking frustrated. "The scent's turned," she said. "I have no idea where it went. It's as though it ducked into a strong-running stream or a wind coming straight towards me."

Harry touched her elbow. "That's all right. You've been more than helpful. Just knowing that the wild Dark is coming in the form of a wolf might give me more of a clue to help defeat it." He doubted it, since everything he knew about the wild Dark was both advantage and disadvantage. It had behaved that way in the past, but it was so chaotic that it might never do so again, or it might turn back and use a mixture of traits that had helped it before. He faced Adalrico. "Did you bring the wards that I asked you for, sir?"

Adalrico nodded and held them out. Harry gathered them up. They were not, precisely, wards, but half-bracelets of wood and leather that grasped a forearm and sheltered those who wore them from most powerful spells. It also limited the wearer's ability to perform defensive magic, but most Dark magic didn't fall under that category, making Harry hope it was all right to use them on Walpurgis. He had known Adalrico was clever at making things, and had asked him if he could manage something like this for everyone who would be at the celebration. If nothing else, it would keep Adalrico's mind off Pharos Starrise, whom, Millicent had told him in confidence, he was spending far too much time thinking about.

"Good," Harry murmured, passing them out one by one. He hesitated when he came to Draco, though. He wasn't sure if Draco's part in the prophecy meant that he couldn't wear one of the bracelets.

Draco met his eyes and shook his head. "No, Harry," he said quietly. "In this, we're equal, and if you have to cast a spell that defends me, I should be able to do the same for you."

Narcissa sucked in a breath, but when Harry glanced at her, she was silent, eyes even shining with something that might have been pride. Harry turned away and went on passing the bracelets out. He heard the sound of them going home around wrists, and then someone tapped him on the shoulder.

He glanced up. One of the strange wizards who had huddled around the fire stood there. He coughed. "Might—might we know what will happen?" he asked.

Harry smiled grimly and nodded to the sky. "You know that a Dark Lord is coming?"

The wizard's hand tightened around his wand. "We could feel as much, yes," he murmured.

"And a prophecy," Harry said quietly, "claims that I'm the one who will defeat that Dark Lord. To stay absolutely out of danger, you probably should have stayed home. You can still Apparate there." He held out the small remaining number of bracelets. "Some of you can wear these. Otherwise, get yourselves under the strongest shield you can find, and hope the battle doesn't touch you."

"This is somewhat outrageous, you know," the wizard said stiffly, even as he took the bracelets from Harry. "Walpurgis is a celebration for all Dark wizards. It should not be interrupted by struggles from a few, and it certainly should not mean danger for those who attend it."

Harry raised an eyebrow, the odd combination of his own mood and the mood the Dark seemed to have planned for him raising his confidence. "It's always dangerous," he said. "Given the magic running around on this night and the doorway that appears. As for not taking place here, tell that to the prophecy prowling the sky." He could feel it drawing nearer now, as if its pacing circles were getting smaller.

The wizard stared at him, then turned away as if he didn't know how to respond. He probably didn't, Harry thought, and it was to the benefit of everyone that this conversation end now.

He turned to Owen, who was staring at the spaces between the stars with a frown as he snapped his own bracelet on. "I need to ask you to stay out of the way," he said quietly. "I know that you're sworn to protect me, but—well, it can't happen now, not when the prophecy asks for the particular people it does."

Owen tore his gaze from the sky, and nodded. "I know that, Harry."

His eyes were heavy with shadows that had nothing to do with the upcoming battle, Harry was sure, and he frowned. "What is it, Owen? Has Draco caused another problem with Michael?"

"No," said Owen softly. "Michael's caused his own problems. It's nothing I want to talk about right now, Harry."

Harry made a small half-bowing gesture and a note to ask Owen about Michael later, and then turned. A breeze was tickling the back of his neck, a breeze that hadn't been there a moment before. He held out his hand and cast as strong a defensive ward over his allies as he could, then moved forward. Draco walked at his right shoulder, the posture the prophecy said he should take. How literal that had to be, Harry didn't know, but he had to admit it was much more comforting to fight Falco with full knowledge of what the prophecy said and how well the three of them fit it, instead of half-guessing and only realizing afterward what had happened, as in the fight with Dumbledore.

The stars began to dance and jingle and shake as if they were bells on a Christmas tree branch. Freezing music drifted down to Harry's ears, sharper and keener than the flakes of snow. He shivered a bit, then glanced over his shoulder. Snape was not far behind him, a stubborn expression on his face.

"Severus," Harry said softly. "Please. Get under the ward."

"No," said Snape.

"He'll hurt you," said Harry, more agitated now. He could feel the first rising of Falco's power in the distance, mighty as a tsunami. Of course, that would not be, mostly, his magic, but the magic of the wild Dark behind him. It seemed they were more closely allied than Harry had hoped, when he first began to believe that the Dark itself was the power this Dark Lord knew not. The prophecy was closer, too, and its thunder rolled like lead weights down Harry's arms. As if that were not enough, he could make out two of the damn things now, tangled and nested in each other. He supposed one was the original prophecy that Dumbledore and Lily had tried to raise him and Connor

to fulfill, and the second was the prophecy that said the original one would happen three times. They'd probably both been present at Dumbledore's defeat, too, but he'd been too caught up in the battle to notice.

And now your mind is running in every direction, and you're thinking nonsense. He turned forcefully towards Snape. "Please, Severus, go back."

Snape opened his mouth to answer, and then the prophecies abruptly drew away. Harry turned just as Falco came down.

He and Draco stepped forward. He heard the soft sound that was Draco drawing his wand from its holster, and then every other noise was lost under the enormous shrieking howl of a wolf the size of Hogwarts.

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Falco was in sea eagle form as he dived, but he flickered in and out of it as he reached the desert of the Dark and saw Harry waiting for him. Harry and others. Falco very nearly smiled. He had learned many things from Tom that were not as useful as he had hoped, like controlling the sirens, but one thing Tom had told him was correct. It had to be, because, watching from a distance, Falco had seen other people successfully use the same tactic.

He nodded to the wolf pacing beside him. It was enormous; actually, he didn't know how large it was, because its edges faded into the night around them and it rebuilt itself again and again from the blackness, now with a grotesquely huge paw, now with a muzzle that could have smashed in the Ministry. It lifted its head at his signal, though, and howled.

The waves of sound rolled over and around him. Falco staggered, but managed to keep flying straight. His heart surged and leaped, and he felt something like gladness, the warmest emotion that had touched him in a long time.

Almost over. And I know this tactic works. Tom said so. Other people said so. Harry cannot compensate for it.

The Dark shot around him, circled around him, as he dived lower and lower, and made the stars shake. Falco could feel the Light waiting just beyond, drawn, as it always was, by the rising of any power of the Dark's. Normally, it would not interfere on Walpurgis, any more than the Dark would on Midsummer.

But it had lost a wizard who had long flirted with it to the Dark when Falco Declared, and if someone powerful enough called on it, giving himself or another to the Light, then the gryphon would spread its wings.

Falco fixed his gaze on the person who would make Harry do that.

A prophecy swayed off to the side like a serpent ready and waiting to strike. Falco ignored it. It was going to be fulfilled, of course, but that was why he had come here. He was a willing sacrifice. A sense of clean and clear purpose filled him. He was, in the end, different from poor Albus, who had needed to torture people just to send out a signal. Falco thought this battle would cost very few lives, maybe one, and maybe two.

He struck. Harry had already begun raising his magic to meet a direct blow.

Falco's strike went past him, a wicked black arrow fringed with teeth, closing around Draco Malfoy and flooding his body with poison, his lungs with black smoke, his tissues with racing cancer. Ripple after ripple of power went home, like waves pounding on the beach. Falco gave all he had into the strike, not bothering to defend himself. Harry would realize what had happened in a moment.

He heard the Dark wolf howl in triumph, as he had expected.

He had not expected to hear Harry howling back as if in answer, or to sense him begin to fight instead of calling on the Light for help.

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Harry turned as Draco fell, shock in his mouth thick as the taste of mint, for a moment. This could not happen. The prophecy had said that someone who loved him, with power, must stand at his right shoulder and help him defeat the Dark Lord. How—how could Draco—

And then he sensed the reek of Dark magic coming from Draco, turning him into little more than a corpse, and a barrier that hadn't fallen in almost two years broke inside him.

It was one thing for Voldemort to do something like this, or Rosier. They were madmen, and both seemed to have a personal grudge against Harry. Harry knew Falco opposed him for other reasons, and if such a human emotion as hatred had occurred to him in the last hundred years, he had probably rejected it as being contrary to what he wanted to achieve.

And now he had hurt Draco.

The barrier crumbled further. Pure and roaring rage had its own black tide in him, to answer what Falco had done. Harry could sense the wild Dark drawing back from Falco to watch, gleeful, as he turned the air around his enemy, inside his lungs, on his skin, to serpents.

He saw the world through a torrent of pitch, and he heard his own screams distantly, mingled with long hisses in Parseltongue that he didn't think anyone else could translate. He took a single step forward, still forcing all his magic at Falco, wanting him to drown in venom, as he had tried to drown Draco in it—

Don't think about that. He would crumble into his fear if he thought about that, if he had time to think about his world falling from beneath him.

He thought of the rage instead, and he screamed and screamed and ordered the serpents forward, and an enormous one had coiled around Falco's body now, half the arms of a man and half the flailing wings of a sea eagle, and could crush him if Harry would but give the command.

Harry gave the command. He could have wished Falco out of existence at that moment, washed on the flickering waves of his own loathing, but that would be too painless. He wanted the man to suffer.

He heard someone moving up behind him, but he didn't look to see who it was. He was leaning forward, banishing thoughts of Draco as they arose, concentrated on the need to inflict pain.

And then Falco's magic rose up against his, and the wild Dark leaned in at his back, unstoppable, unfightable. Harry's serpents exploded into a dark rain of flesh and muscle, and he went sprawling to the ground, pelted with bone shards, while Falco moved to hover above him.

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Falco was frightened, and angry. Why is he not calling on the Light?

He could feel the bruising impact of the serpent's coils on himself if he let his mind dwell there. He would not let it dwell there. The wild Dark, which had drawn off as if to watch the chaos with a gleeful eye, had come back to him, and now it was helping him drive Harry down.

And a new thought darted into Falco's mind, swift as rain, quick as light.

Why not kill Harry?

If it could be done, then it would solve a great many problems. Yes, it would disrupt the prophecy, but prophecies could shift. Obviously, it would have to choose someone else if Harry was dead. It would still come true, but human interference could change the course of it. Someone else would kill Tom, that was all.

Of course, killing Harry would leave Britain with two Dark Lords and no Light ones, but Falco could depart again, going into hiding or to another wizarding community where no Lords or Ladies lived. He was not bound to the island of his birth. And it would mean no more vates

in the world, in a surer way than any Declaration to Light could ever do.

He wondered, for a moment, how much of his decision was driven by the mighty and unexpected pain he had suffered when Harry sent the serpents to grip him, but he dismissed it from his mind. If he was going to kill the boy instead of sparing him and making him Declare—and he had almost made up his mind to do so; Harry was Darker than he had ever thought, to reach for Dark magic at the moment when his lover's life was in danger—then he didn't need to give him mercy or worry about his own motives. He only needed to kill him.

He decided that breaking his mind would be the simplest procedure. Whether or not the body lived after that, his task was done.

He wrapped and shaped his power into another arrowhead, aided by the will of the wild Dark. He could feel it champing and dancing beside him, eager as a wolf on the blood trail. Falco would fling the arrowhead into the exact and vulnerable center of Harry's mind, and destroy his sanity; a second shot would destroy the tattered shards of what remained.

And then someone else attacked him from the side, and at the same moment, the prophecy rose and rushed forward, a song in its throat like a tide made of icicles—

And the wild Dark wheeled back and away from him, once again hovering at a distance to watch.

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The world was very simple.

There was Harry, lying still on the ground, covered in blood, covered in gashes. There was the Dark Lord about to destroy him, with so much magic that it made his head swim and his eyes blur. Harry could absorb that power, perhaps, but backlash and worry about Draco had paralyzed him. He could see tears already forming on Harry's face, as the fear for Draco began to fight its way through the wall of hatred he had raised.

Luckily for Harry, his impulses were towards vengeance, and his hatred had always been stronger than his fear.

Snape aimed his wand at Falco, his magic rising like a tornado around him at the same time, a wheel of eyes and fangs and claws. “Inimicus!”

Even as the Hostility Curse shot away from him, he felt thunder like a drum in his head, and a high, ecstatic singing that was probably the result of Harry’s allies doing something to aid him, assuming they had broken out of the ward Harry had put them behind. Snape would not turn to look. He was going to defend his child, and he was going to use Darker magic than Harry would have approved of to do it.

The Hostility Curse hit Falco, and the man—half a man now, half an eagle, and some other creature, fading into night, at the edges—turned to stare at him. He would have been stupefied and blinded by the loathing put behind that spell, Snape knew. It was a curse that let an enemy know exactly how one felt about him.

And knocked him off-balance for the next one. Snape smiled slightly. “Contundo!”

That was a spell he had learned from Evan Rosier, one that slipped inside an opponent’s magical shields and promptly began to beat on their joints and the fragile places in their bones, shattering them. Falco shuddered, and lost another moment to the pain, to the wonder that he could be hurt, or perhaps to the fact that the wild Dark had circled away and abandoned him again.

Snape followed that curse with another. This was vengeance. It would not do to give his enemy time to recover, but neither would it do to blend the curses together so much that he could not appreciate the finer nuances of pain Snape intended to give him.

“Confervefacio!”

His wandless magic whirled around him and bore the spell up in a cloud of colored sparks; while normally it could strike anywhere on

the body, Snape had wanted it targeted at Falco's eyes, and so it was. He smiled again as he heard the shriek. One's eyes melting into jelly and dribbling out of one's head would be a bit distracting even to a Dark Lord.

Another step forward, another Dark spell. "Deliquesco medullae!"

The marrow in Falco's bones vanished. Snape had never felt the effects of that spell himself, but he was told it was exquisitely painful. He listened with a detached ear to the wail that produced, then swung into the next one.

"Ad—"

And then Falco recovered enough to strike out at him.

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It had all gone so wrong, so badly, so suddenly, and Falco did not know what to make of it.

He could hear the rustling laughter behind him as the wild Dark watched him struggle and writhe in pain, and he could feel the sudden creeping changes in his body as his bone marrow vanished, and he could sense his magic rushing in to compensate, but what drew his attention most were his eyes.

He could replace them, perhaps, but the pain—

This was Dark magic unleashed. This was a man who had not become a Dark wizard because he was thinking about the balance of the world and how many Light wizards already existed, or even because he had come from a pureblood tradition that expected its children to Declare for the allegiances of their parents. This was an upstart, a wizard who had done what he had done out of hatred, who even now was doing this out of vengeance.

He dared to hurt me.

And Falco moved, bringing around his power and striking out with it, shapeless, formless, not knowing what would happen, but willing something to do so.

He heard a dry crack, and wished he knew if it meant that he had shattered Severus Snape's back, or neck. He heard the wild Dark laughing again, howling itself hoarse, but it did not come to him. He should have known better than to trust it, Falco thought bitterly.

He began to concentrate. He could, if he thought about it hard enough, Transfigure flesh into other shapes. He might be able to grow eyes in the palms of his hands. Granted, it had been years since he had studied the delicate shape of the eye and he did not know if he remembered enough about the iris and the cornea to be able to do so, but he would try.

And then Harry recovered.

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One kind of barrier had given way when Harry was worried about Draco, and another when that worry intruded and occupied his mind. And then he saw Snape fall, one of his legs broken so cleanly that it had snapped like a branch, and yet a third kind of barrier broke.

The lightless fury that climbed out from inside him was familiar. He had felt it three times before. Once was when Minister Fudge attempted to drain his magic. The second was when his mother had confronted him and tried to convince him to come back to Godric's Hollow with her. The third was when Bellatrix had cut off his hand and he had faced Voldemort in a duel immediately afterwards.

He had not felt it in nearly two years. But it came back to him, filling his limbs with familiarity. And Harry did not need to rise to his feet in order to use it. He opened his mouth in a soundless cry, and the fury lifted through him, ripping and twisting and warping through his magic, blasting the air with such ice that Harry felt it lash and burn down his throat. His magic came right behind it, and together they aimed themselves at Falco.

And then the wild Dark was there, too, slamming its shoulder into Harry's power, driving it forward, howling and dancing. Harry could not rely on it, he knew that, but the consideration seemed far away right now. He reached for the chaos, and it answered him, harsh and gleeful as if he had Declared for it. This was not the wild Dark of last Midwinter, or last Walpurgis, or any other time but when it had come from the sky after Midsummer and tried to charm him away. That was the significance of the wolf form, Harry realized hazily. It had worn it once before. It was, in fact, wearing it for the same reason now, because he was uncontrolled enough to attract its attention.

They hit Falco from three fronts, three sides. Harry felt him writhing, filled with magic as it held him up despite lack of bone marrow and tried to let him know what was going on and protect him from attack.

He knew what he wanted. And he was already divided neatly into three, his magic and the rage and the wild Dark. He sent them each to their tasks, and heard the wild Dark's voice whispering in his head: I go.

The rage wrapped around Falco, blasting him with the cold, whispering into his head that he was going to die.

The magic opened bright tunnels between Draco's and Snape's fallen bodies, sucking Falco's magic from him without remorse, and channeling it directly into them. Harry did not try to give his power to them as a permanent gift. He did heal the break in Snape's leg, and the poison and disease that Falco had set loose in Draco. He did it without flinching, and he could not have said how he did it, though in an ordinary state of mind, he would have had to think about it intensely to achieve the effect he wanted. This was Harry angry, however, so he simply willed it, and it happened.

The wild Dark waited, poised, circling, until Falco was beginning to recover and fight against the drain of his magic, which shock and pain had kept him from doing at first. Then it struck. Harry saw a giant black paw move across the sky, bearing silver nails like shooting stars.

It tore Falco apart on all levels; the physical was the least of them. His organs spilled out and pelted into the snow-covered sand around Harry with the soft sounds of leather sacks bursting, but his mind went flying too, his sanity torn like the cloth of a kite, and his soul unraveled like the bit of Tom Riddle from the diary Horcrux, and his magic tumbled out like blood and was sucked into the wild Dark's hungry maw.

It devoured him, and in less than a minute Falco's skin was left floating in the air like a flag. Harry thought it might come to rest on the earth in front of him, but the wild Dark puffed on it and blew it away into the night, to be chased and played with by multiple shadow-puppies.

And the prophecy sang all around him, ecstatic, warm, somnolent.

Harry, gasping, drove his hands into the sand and gradually worked himself to his feet. His mind rang and his body blazed with power, which he knew would give way to magical and emotional exhaustion, which would give way to pain. But for the moment, the magic still held him up, and he bowed in the direction the wild Dark had gone, understanding many more things in that moment than he had before.

The power Falco didn't know was the Dark. But it was my own Dark magic, and Snape's, as well as the wild Dark. And that truly is chaotic. It helped both him and us. Why? Probably for the sake of a good time. I finally have a safeguard against every trusting it again.

And the prophecy—

The prophecy said that Snape needed to stand at my right shoulder this time, and not Draco after all.

Harry grimaced a bit, as the lines of the third prophecy Trelawney had given shuddered in his mind again.

"Three on three the old one coils,

Three in its times, three in its choices."

The old prophecy is happening three times. I got that part right. But it's making a different choice of elder and younger each time. It already chose Draco and me. It couldn't have us a second time.

He thought the prophecy's song grew especially smug at that, as he turned to check on Draco and Snape. His other allies had already broken the ward he'd put them under, probably with their combined strength, and were running towards them. Narcissa was bending over Draco, her face pale with shock. Draco had his eyes open and appeared to be aware of his surroundings, Harry saw.

He stooped over Snape, and Snape's eyes met his without backing down. Harry squeezed his hand.

"Thank you," he said. "I would not—would not have found the strength if you had not done what you did." Already he could feel the rage dissipating, departing, not being locked behind barriers in him again, but fading into the charged midnight. Well, if there was any time of the year in which that could happen, it would be this one, especially since the wild Dark on this Walpurgis seemed to have allowed him to mirror its mood.

"I could not stand by and see you hurt," said Snape in a groaning, rasping voice.

"I know." Harry looked at his leg. "Can you walk?"

Snape demonstrated by standing, though he braced one hand on Harry's shoulder to do so. His face flashed white when he took his first step, but in a few moments he was only limping, and Harry was satisfied. Falco's magic had returned what Falco's magic had stolen.

"Harry?"

He turned swiftly, Narcissa's voice making him fear the worst, but she shook her head at him and stood with Draco in her arms. She must have cast a Lightening Charm, Harry thought distantly as he strode over to her.

"He's asleep," Narcissa whispered. "The shock, you know." Harry nodded, and avoided her eyes for a moment, but she caught his cheek with one elbow and tilted his head up. "Harry. I do not blame you."

He made himself look into her face until he believed her, then studied Draco with wide-open eyes that saw the magic as well as the physical reality of things. One by one, his muscles relaxed. There was no disease left. Draco would probably still have to spend some days in the hospital wing under the care of Madam Pomfrey, from the effects of having that much magic shoved into and then drawn out of his body, but he would do much more than simply survive.

He looked at his allies then, but saw at a glance that all of them were standing and well. The strangers who had been around the fire were gone, but Harry saw no bodies on the ground.

"They Apparated out when they saw the battle start," Thomas assured him, coming up to him. "Cowards. That was fascinating." He stared into the black sky as if longing for the wolf to come back.

Harry sighed a little. "From a certain viewpoint, yes, it was, Thomas," he agreed. "Do you want to come back to Hogwarts with me and examine Draco?" He trusted Madam Pomfrey, but he would feel better if he also had someone to study Draco for the aftereffects of magic.

"I'd be delighted." Thomas beamed. "Just let me inform Priscilla and my children." He tapped his wrist with his wand to start the communication spell.

Harry nodded to the others. "Thank you for coming," he said. "I appreciate that you were willing to stand with me. I'll be at Hogwarts if anyone wishes to Apparate there and talk to me." He certainly wasn't going to sleep tonight, as keyed up as he was.

One by one, the people around him began to vanish. Snape seemed inclined to wait for him, but Harry gave him a long look, and he went.

Harry used that precious moment of time alone to compose himself, as much as that was possible, and draw a deep breath.

Inevitably, his mind returned to the prophecy.

It has to make a third choice. It has to have a third pair for elder and younger. And who is that going to be? Me and someone else who loves me, going in to face Voldemort? I can't imagine doing it without Draco or Snape, though. And if it's Connor...well, he still doesn't love the whole of the wizarding world. I don't know who it can be, and that makes me nervous.

He heard a low snarl, and opened his eyes. The black wolf crouched in front of him, green-eyed, bearing the silver lightning bolt on its head, and its gaze was pure invitation, calling him into the paths of the Dark and the million mindless secrets that lived there.

"I am not going to Declare," Harry whispered. "Falco was wrong about that, and so are you."

The wolf gave a little satisfied chuff of breath, and spoke in the voice he'd heard on the night he went to free the thestrals. It doesn't matter what you do. I will have you someday.

"I don't think so," Harry said.

The wild Dark laughed, and laughed, and then broke apart, scattering into the air as a cloud of black flakes that it hurt Harry's eyes to see.

He glanced once at the desert, then wearily Apparated back to Hogwarts. It had been a Walpurgis night like none other in history, he thought, but he supposed the wild Dark might be insane enough to disrupt its own celebrations on a whim, too.

Interlude: The Liberator's Ninth Letter

May 1st, 1997

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

Falco Parkinson is dead.

I know that you probably know this already, but I could not forbear writing you a letter when I felt him perish in my head. I was having a dream I did not understand, because of the confusion of light and magic in it, but I saw the moment when the Dark rent him apart.

I am so relieved, sir, but I can only imagine what you and Harry vates must be feeling, now that the Dark Lord who threatened your power and his life is gone at last. I hope my information has made some little difference in the fight against him.

As well, sir, I heard the speech that you gave a few days after I sent my last letter, saying that anyone who was a friend of the Ministry and unfairly threatened by your enemies had only to come to you for protection. I have been thinking about that since. As I said before, I have so rarely been out of the house that I am woefully ignorant about the ways of the wizarding world. My parents Apparated me most everywhere, when they allowed me out. I have seen the houses of some of their friends, and Diagon Alley once or twice, but I have never seen a map, and I am not sure how far the Ministry lies from my home.

I do not ask for rescue. I am not even sure how useful my information was to you, sir. I still think that I must find my way out of here myself. But I will, if I can, include a subtle list of clues here that may enable you to tell me my location relative to the Ministry. Sending a letter to me will not work, but another speech which includes, among other information, the placing of my father's house might. As I said once before, however, he has spells that will enable him to identify a letter leaving the house with his name in it, or an anagram, so I must be as careful as I can.

I know we are in a place often called the evergreen country.

I know that my parents have often told me the Dark is anathema, and should be cast out of proper wizarding society if at all possible.

I know that my father's "friends" are submissive to him, and would bow their heads and lend their money if he asked to any project, though none of them have very much.

Our name resembles the light that comes after the moon and the stars.

I am sorry, sir, that I can be no more specific. And please do not distress yourself if no opportunity comes for some months to give me any clue. I have survived so far, and I can continue surviving. But I have begun to trust that I will be free, and even that I have friends who can aid me after my escape. I hope that I may someday see you face to face, to thank you for the sense of purpose and the inspiration that you have given me, and be able to do the same thing for Harry vates.

Yours,

The Liberator.

Chapter Eighty-Four: A Week of Sunlight

Thursday

Harry wasn't by Draco's bed when he awakened, but he came in less than a moment later, carrying a huge book in his arms, and his smile when he saw Draco was as sweet as Draco could have hoped. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Awful," Draco said frankly, stretching his arms above his head and then wincing as pains shot through them. "What in the world happened last night?" He could remember the glimpse of a white eagle and a dark wolf traveling towards him, and then nothing after that.

"Falco attacked you," Harry said quietly. "Hit you with an arrow made of poison that tried to corrupt your body." His hand stroked Draco's shoulder as though he wanted to convince himself Draco was still healthy, living flesh, and present in the same room with him. "I grew angry and attacked him in turn, but he managed to throw me off. Then Snape struck, and when Falco drove him back, I finally mustered the rage to defeat him."

"Is Professor Snape all right?" Draco asked, attempting to keep down his jealousy that other people had got to see that sight and he hadn't.

"Yes, he is. Recovering from a sudden healing of a broken leg, but Madam Pomfrey says he'll be fine." Harry wrinkled his brow at him. "Draco, what's the matter? You're biting your lip and trying not to grimace."

"I love the sight of you when you're in the full flood of your power," Draco said, deciding that he couldn't conceal his jealousy well enough. "And other people were able to see that, and I wasn't."

Harry put the book down on the edge of the bed, keeping his head attentively bent over the pages for a moment. Draco saw the muscles in his cheek quivering, and knew it was to hide a smile. He scowled, and then scowled harder when Harry began to laugh, quietly.

"If you think it's that funny," Draco began.

Harry waved his left hand at him, light striking silver from the dog's-head emblem in the center. "Not at all. Oh, Draco. Some things about you will never change, and I do love that." He leaned forward and kissed Draco, nicely enough that Draco felt a bit mollified when he drew back. "I'll put the memory into a Pensieve for you when you're well enough to appreciate it. Now. Madam Pomfrey said you would be feeling awful when you woke up, so I brought a book to read to you and keep you entertained. But first, do you want anything to eat?"

"No," Draco said. His stomach felt like a hollow, but it was a churning hollow. He was sure that he would vomit up anything he tried to eat. He arranged himself on the pillows and stared pathetically at Harry. "What book did you bring me? It had better not be for homework."

Harry shook his head and took a seat on a chair beside the bed, once again gathering up the book. "No. I asked your mother what your favorite book had been as a child, and she owled me this this morning."

Draco felt his mouth fall open. Perhaps he should have recognized the book at once, but he hadn't seen it for years, since his father had made a quiet little speech on his eighth birthday and told Draco it was time to put away childish stories and concentrate on pureblood rituals, history, and spellwork. But sure enough, Harry was turning it to reveal the bright green lettering on the brown leather cover that Draco remembered. Perhaps he should have found it garish. He had learned to appreciate it too young, however, to care. He associated that book with too many memories of his mum or house elves reading stories from it to him.

Of course, it would be embarrassing if anyone came into the hospital wing and found Harry reading children's stories to him. Draco tried to warn him about that. "Um, Harry, maybe you should put up a privacy ward?" He shook his head a moment later. "What on earth inspired you to ask my mum for that, anyway?"

“I almost lost you last night,” Harry said bluntly. “It was Falco’s mistake, ultimately. He could have paralyzed me if he’d taken you hostage—“

“Just like everyone else,” Draco said, thinking of Rosier and Voldemort.

Harry picked up his hand and kissed the back of it. “But he tried to kill you,” he said softly. “I was so angry, Draco. I think part of me is still reaching up into the night, trying to find the bit of my temper that flew away. I’d like you to hear stories that I know you’ll enjoy. Please?”

Draco studied his face for a moment. He could have defended his dignity by saying that they were children’s stories and of course he would want different reading material as an adult, but the truth was that he’d never enjoyed any other fiction he read with the pure, sheer pleasure of the book Harry held now.

“All right,” he whispered.

Harry beamed at him and sat back to flip through the book. “Which one do you like best?” he asked.

It didn’t take Draco long to answer that. “The Sword, the Cup, the Tree,” he said. He had always felt the story flowing past him as a tide of wonder, of beautiful words and images. He had tried to memorize it, but every time he read or heard it, he became so caught up in the experience that he was left with only scattered debris at the end. He was lucky he was able to remember the title, he thought.

Harry sought a moment for it in the table of contents, then sat back and began to read. Draco closed his eyes, not to fall asleep but to let himself be drawn into the tale more intensely.

““A sword as beautiful as morning! A cup like the bottom of a jewel! A tree that bears song in its boughs! Those are the gifts that I want for my joining, Mother, and I’ll take no others.””

Memories of warmth and love and comfort piled up around Draco, adding to the warmth of the blankets and the hand Harry placed on

his, cocooning him in such contentment that he would have purred if he knew how. He let himself be swept away, once again.

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Friday

Snape lifted his head slowly. A small, soft sound had distracted him from his marking. He turned around, half-certain he would find the Potter brat crouching in a corner under his Invisibility Cloak and trying to distract him. It was the kind of thing the Potter brat would do.

Harry frowned at him over the potion he was brewing, a burn salve for the hospital wing. Snape had tried to explain that Harry didn't need to repay Madam Pomfrey for Draco's care, and Harry had said that he understood that but wanted to make the potion anyway. "Is something wrong, Severus?"

"I thought I heard...something." Snape drew his wand and cast several spells that would allow him to detect unseen intruders, assuming that any had got through his wards in the first place. He could find no one. Other than a spider spinning a web in a corner, Argutus, who was coiled around the legs of the table on which Harry brewed his potion, and a small army of ants come in from the Forbidden Forest who had found crumbs in the corner and were excitedly carrying them back to their nest, nothing was alive in the rooms but him and Harry.

"I didn't hear anything."

Snape at last nodded and turned back to his marking. This time, when the small sound started again, he didn't turn or lift his wand. He tried to sharpen his senses instead, imagining that his hearing extended beyond his head. He chopped away other stimuli by lowering his eyelids until a web of darkness occupied his sight and forcing his attention away from the texture of parchment and quill beneath his hands.

The sound was definitely coming from behind him, and not too distant. And it was musical, if one wanted to apply the term musical to such a tiny, faint noise. A hum? Yes, it could be a hum.

Snape's first thought was of a trapped insect, perhaps a bee, his spell hadn't managed to detect.

Then he had a far more interesting thought, and cast a spell on himself to give him absolute silence before he turned.

Harry was measuring the next batch of ingredients into the burn salve. Argutus gave a long, drawn-out hiss which Snape presumed was his version of advice. Harry hissed back at him, sounding more amused than anything, even given the often angry tone of Parseltongue.

And the small sound stopped, and then resumed again the moment Harry ended his hiss.

Harry was humming beneath his breath as he prepared the burn salve, seeming entirely unaware of it.

Snape watched him in silence for a long moment. Harry didn't stiffen or flinch or glance up at him, and that was also unusual; most of the time, he was too aware of his surroundings, to the point where Snape thought his training had made it impossible for him to fully relax. Now, though, he was focused, intent, and yet comfortable, and he hummed.

And Snape did not think it was just the burn salve, a relatively uncomplicated potion, that had made him so.

He likes being in the same room I am. He likes brewing potions when he knows that I'm here to watch him.

Snape shook his head slightly, and Harry caught a glimpse of the motion from his peripheral vision and stopped humming. "Is something wrong?" he asked again.

"The Gryffindor essays," Snape said with some dignity, "are particularly bad." That was no less than the truth.

Harry laughed, and in the sound was more delight than the situation warranted. Snape felt an unfamiliar emotion heave itself slowly over like a seal in his belly. Harry was—happy here with him.

"I'm sure you'll manage to show that House of dunderheads what's what," Harry told him.

Snape turned back to face the essays again. "I certainly will."

He waited for the humming to resume before he started the marking again.

It went on for approximately ten minutes, before Harry said, in English, "Argutus, don't touch that!" and there was a loud explosion and an Omen snake to be rescued from the thick blue paste that had adhered to his scales. But even that did not disconcert Snape. He credited the humming with putting him in a good mood beforehand.

He might have few enough moments like this with his son. He would take them when and how he could.

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Saturday

Harry paused for a moment when he heard voices ahead of him. He had assumed he was alone in the hallway just outside the library. He debated for a moment whether he should walk ahead and simply pass whoever they were; they seemed to be more intent on their conversation than going to the library, while Harry needed to continue with his Horcrux research.

Then he recognized one of the voices as Hermione's, and one of the voices as Zacharias's, and heard his own name. He hesitated. He didn't want to eavesdrop on them, but Draco would surely tell him he was stupid to miss a chance to hear what people were saying about him among themselves. And he listened to what Argutus told him of people's behavior, which was just another form of eavesdropping.

He promised himself he would move away the moment he heard something that made him uncomfortable, and laid his head on the wall.

“—makes it a lot more palatable,” Zacharias was saying, his tone smug. Of course, Harry didn’t think he had many voice tones that were not variants of “smug.” “She even admitted that she might, might, come around to thinking better of the Grand Unified Theory, since Harry obviously doesn’t feel that it denigrates his magic or makes him look less powerful than he really is.”

“Of course, Harry’s a halfblood,” said Hermione, her voice relaxed and musing. Harry smiled as he pictured her standing in a posture other than with her hands on her hips, perhaps even leaning against Zacharias and closing her eyes. If anyone deserved the ability to put aside her burdens for a time and collapse like that, it was Hermione, especially since the end-of-the-year exams were approaching and Hermione would soon make life intolerable for herself and everyone else in Gryffindor Tower—if she wasn’t already doing that. “That might mean that your mother would be less inclined to listen to him.”

“She’s not that prejudiced,” said Zacharias, and Harry could feel the look Hermione gave him. “Or, well, all right, she is, but Harry’s a special case. His magic tends to overrule her feelings about his blood. If that wasn’t the case, she would never have fought beside him at Midsummer, or let me do so.”

“Would you have done it anyway?” Hermione interrupted.

A reflective pause, and Zacharias said, “Yes. It would have distressed my mother, but yes.”

Hermione made a soft, satisfied noise. Harry, meanwhile, tried to stifle his grin and failed. He hoped that no one would come up behind him and ask him why he was grinning like a fool.

“As I was saying,” Zacharias continued, “she did think that Harry would feel insulted and belittled by the Grand Unified Theory, or not care that much about it. He still doesn’t have that many Muggleborn allies, after all. His most influential campaigns have been about other

species. But now I've told her that he supports it fully, which is true, and applauds the free will of magic that chose him apparently at whim."

Whim would be better than prophecy, Harry thought.

"And that made her say she'll think about it," Zacharias said. "It's a long way from outright conviction, but it's much better than absolute refusal."

"Good," said Hermione, and then there was a sound of kissing which seemed like it might endure for a while.

Harry softly backed off and took another corridor to the library. He still could not stop grinning like a fool, though a few of the students he passed gave him odd looks.

That's how it spreads, how it grows. A little at a time, tendril by tendril. Small things help it along more than large epiphanies. And most of the time, if I'm there, it's just as a guiding figure, not someone actively helping.

Harry lifted his head. House elves were speaking in their own voices now, thanks to Dobby. If wizards and witches could do the same thing, he was more than proud of what he had achieved so far.

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Sunday

Harry smiled, and stepped forward, firmly shaking the hand Periwinkle Lyrebird held out to him. She was a small woman, almost dwarfed by the enormous red robe she wore, marked with a dancing lyrebird. Harry eyed the patches in it, and nodded to himself. The Lyrebirds were not much richer than the Weasleys, if he read the signs correctly. They would benefit from the money he gave them, and the debt of gratitude would benefit him in more ways than just raising a few poverty-stricken pureblood families back to their old status.

“As we agreed, so it is done,” said Periwinkle, in a soft, creaky voice that carried some distance, thanks to the spells Harry had quietly spread on the wind outside Hogwarts. The crowd of students, a few reporters, some Ministry officials, and other purebloods, Light and Dark, who had traveled to the school when they heard of what was going to happen today leaned forward. “We have the promise of your allegiance to protect us from enemies, vates, including Cupressus Apollonis. In return, you have our alliance and our support. And we have your promise of Galleons fulfilled.” She turned to face the small group of wizards and witches behind her, all representatives of Light families who until recently had been too frightened to move against Apollonis. “Now we fulfill our promise as concerns our house elves.”

The men and women gently led their house elves forward. Harry wondered if they would have been as gentle with them if this ceremony was in private, and then forced himself to dismiss that concern, and breathe in the warm, thin air and the soft May sunshine. It was public now, and they treated their house elves kindly for this one moment.

After this moment, it would no longer be a concern.

Periwinkle and the other humans stepped away, and Harry knelt so that he looked into the house elves’ wide, earnest eyes. More than one pair was wet. Others gripped their ears and pulled on them in silence, or tried to hide their faces from Harry’s gaze. They knew, at the moment, only that they were being shoved away by families they had faithfully served, and could not understand why.

Harry reached out for their webs. Essential weaknesses pervaded them already, weaknesses that would not have been there if the owners had not yielded their claims of their own free will. He closed his eyes, committed himself to a vision of transparent, tangled paths with enormous knots in the middle that tied the conventional freedom-binding webs to the ones that convinced the elves their service was of their own desire, and launched himself forward.

It was not easy, but it was as close to uneventful as any web-breaking Harry had ever done. He felt Draco, out of the hospital wing for the first time this morning, come forward and tighten his hand on

his shoulder, but otherwise sensations from his own body were distant. He sliced through the webs like a knife, kicked at the knots, and bit his way through the tangles, and sometime in the middle he felt the elves' magic rise, helping him shrug the bonds off.

The moment the last strands came loose, he flung himself backward, drawing his magic up in golden-shining replicas of phoenix wings to let his audience know it was done.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the house elves' bodies dissolving in front of him, turning into a mixture of great green trains and silver veils of magic. They danced around each other, celebrating, losing shape and form until Harry could imagine they were portraying the primal matter their shapeshifting kind had come from. His eyes filled with tears as he watched the image that, for one moment, arranged itself out of the silver and the green: a healthy, living tree, with silver leaves and fruit, rooted in the earth deeper than any human could go and extending higher into the sky than any mortal tree could reach.

Then the magic collapsed into one long, straight beam, and soared off into the sky. Harry shaded his eyes with one hand, and thought they were aiming at the sun.

He glanced around, and saw more than one wet cheek, more than one pair of hastily wiped eyes, in the audience. Some people gaped with open awe on their faces. Harry smiled. Dobby's impact had spread far and wide, but this would go further. And some people already looked hungry for another sight of such wonder. Well, they could achieve it if they had house elves and would free them.

“Thank you for coming today,” he said, and nodded to Periwinkle Lyrebird. “May all house elves, in the end, go free with such grace.”

Once again, as yesterday, he was grinning like a fool, but this time he shared it with more than one person, including Draco, who turned him around and concealed his own foolish smile by pressing his mouth to Harry's.

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Monday

Connor paused when he reached his usual table for Charms study in the library. Harry was sitting there, bent over his Charms textbook and muttering imprecations under his breath which seemed to be directed at the fact that he couldn't find the bit of evidence he needed to make a point for his essay.

"Harry?" Connor ventured at last. He glanced around, to see if Ron was sitting at another table, but he hadn't arrived yet. Draco wasn't there, either, for that matter, and that surprised Connor even more. He would have thought his brother's boyfriend would be sitting right next to him the day after he finally managed to leave the hospital wing.

"Connor! Hullo." Harry grinned up at him, and nodded to his book. "Have you started on the essay for Flitwick yet?"

"Hermione tried to make me, but I didn't let her," said Connor blankly, sitting down and chiding himself for being so surprised. Why was it unusual for Harry to want to study with him?

Well, he's never done it before, that's why.

And because he was a Gryffindor and didn't need to attend to all the intricate emotional and verbal maneuvering that Slytherins seemed to perform around each other, Connor felt able to ask straight out. "Why are you here, Harry?"

"It occurred to me," said Harry, still flipping back and forth in the book, and then slowing and reading a paragraph that seemed to continue from one page to another, "that we don't spend much time together outside of Quidditch practice. Now, I like flying, but I don't think it should be the only interest common to both of us. And since I'm not playing this year, and you are, all I'm really doing is training you, while not benefiting Slytherin in any way." He grinned again, letting Connor know that he didn't really mean that last statement. "And I know that we both have some difficulty with Charms. I know specific spells, but not a lot of theory connecting them, because I mostly learned defensive magic, whether it was charms or curses or

something else.” Connor flinched a bit, expectantly, but Harry didn’t look as though he was reliving bad memories of his childhood when he talked about his training. “You have the difficulty because—” Harry broke off and shook his head. “I don’t know why, Connor, and I should. I should know that kind of thing about my own brother.”

“I understand why you don’t,” said Connor, anxious in case Harry should start blaming himself again.

“I know,” Harry whispered. “But I want to spend some more time with you, and find out. What is the biggest difficulty that you have with Charms?”

Connor let out a small, relieved breath, and opened his book. “Hermione’s asked me that,” he said. “And Parvati’s asked me that. A lot.” He scowled, thinking of the way that Parvati could flip her wand and perform the smallest and most delicate spells, ones that arranged her hair to fall just the way she wanted or moved her makeup around on her face without her needing to spend hours in front of the mirror the way Connor had heard some Muggle girls did. “And I don’t know why. I don’t think it’s just one problem. Sometimes I understand a Charm well enough, and then don’t understand any of the others related to it.”

“Then let’s look,” Harry said, sliding over to sit in the chair next to him.

Connor couldn’t help taking one more look around the library. “Have you seen Ron? We usually study together now.”

“I know.” Harry peered up at him from beneath his fringe. “I caught him earlier and asked him if we could have this hour alone. And I told Draco the same thing. You don’t mind, do you? I know I should probably have asked first, but I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Not at all,” said Connor, and felt a small and happy pit open in the center of his stomach as he bent over his Charms textbook beside Harry.

Harry concentrated, and the book fell open at the page Connor had studied most often and still didn’t understand, the Bird-Calling Charm.

"How did you do that?" Connor asked, impressed. "Did you read my mind?"

Harry looked at him as if he were mad. "No, I felt the crease in the book and moved it so it fell open there," he said, holding up his hand, which Connor hadn't noticed under the binding.

Connor shook his head. He was still unused to Harry having a left hand, and had missed it. "Right."

It still didn't diminish his happiness.

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Tuesday

"Tell him he's a bastard," Millicent said helpfully, hanging over Harry's shoulder. "That's the worst insult for someone like him, to imply that he's not the rightful heir of his family's legacy." Then her eyes lit up. "No, use some of the proof from the Grand Unified Theory to show that he must be a halfblood or a Muggleborn, because of course no intelligence can possibly still exist in the pureblood lines."

Harry raised an eyebrow and noted to himself that Millicent seemed to resent the Grand Unified Theory more than he'd thought. Something to remember. "What do you think, Draco?"

Draco was reading Cupressus Apollonis's letter, which he'd sent to Harry when he found out his allies were abandoning him, in silence. Now he lifted his head and raised a lazy eyebrow.

"You didn't even notice the implication he gave that you both have an equal social standing?" he asked.

"What equal social standing?" demanded a Slytherin third-year, Josephine Hornblower, leaning forward. Harry had been aware that the letter was attracting attention outside the contingent of himself, Millicent, Owen, and Draco, but this was the first person who had intruded.

“Look at this.” Draco unabashedly showed her the letter, ignoring Harry’s attempt to snatch it back. “He’s claiming that they’re both Lords. That’s insulting on at least two levels. Harry’s not Declared and he won’t use compulsion, and Apollonis doesn’t have enough power to be a Lord.”

“That was a turn of phrase,” Harry muttered, disgusted. “I think it was just his wording that was bad. It’s not what he meant, Draco.”

Draco’s second eyebrow joined the first. “So what?”

Harry opened his mouth to retort, but Josephine interrupted. “That’s disgusting,” she said roundly, and waved the letter like a banner. “He has no right to talk to anyone like that, much less someone stronger than he is and who just took his allies away from him. If he didn’t have the power to keep them, then he shouldn’t have extracted promises from them in the first place.” She faced Harry. “I want to take this and have my cousin publish it. Can I?”

Harry imagined that letter in the Vox Populi and opened his mouth to refuse. It would insult Cupressus horribly, and probably make him all the more infuriated and likely to strike out blindly.

And then he thought of the insulting tone of the letter, which he would have found intolerable even when his training was in full effect, and how Cupressus seemed to believe that the allegiance of Periwinkle Lyrebird and the others was some sort of material possession that Harry had stolen and could simply hand back to him.

Does he deserve the courtesy of a reply?

No, he doesn’t.

Harry shut his mouth and nodded to Josephine. “If you want to send it to your cousin Dionysus, you have my permission.”

Josephine gave him a smile that resembled a shark’s, and jumped up from the table to run to the Owlery.

“Was that the wisest idea?” Millicent asked, gingerly.

Harry shrugged and started eating again. “Maybe it would be better to keep it private,” he said. “But then, I think, he would continue to believe that I was going to back down and yield to him. Elder Juniper of the Wizengamot thought the same way, as long as I accepted the way he owed me. And I have no time and no patience to dance with Cupressus Apollonis the way he wants me to. I have no respect for him, either, given what he did to his daughter.” His daughters, perhaps. Scrimgeour had told him that he thought their nameless helper against Falco Parkinson was an Apollonis daughter, a younger sister of Ignifer’s, from clues in her latest letter, and he was planning a raid to free her if possible. “This will at least set the terms of our feud out in the open.”

“Of course it will,” said Draco, looking serene. “That’s why I showed the letter to Josephine in the first place.”

Harry let him think that.

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Wednesday

“What is that?” Harry slammed to a stop just inside the room that Thomas had taken as his own, frankly staring. He had grown used to seeing scatterings of odd notes, equally odd diagrams, and sometimes spell residue in this room, but he had never seen anything like the white sphere that turned gyrations around Thomas’s head. Harry thought at first it was following the course of his wand, but then he realized Thomas stood with his hands and his wand both hanging limply at his sides, laughing.

“There you are, Harry.” Thomas motioned him closer. “This is what happened when I said Diffindo while holding my nose.”

“While holding your nose.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Thomas, not noticing or disregarding his tone of voice. “I received some new research from Jing-Xi today. She said

that the part of the body least affected by cutting spells like Diffindo was the nose.” He touched his own nose, the strip of skin between the nostrils. “Probably because it refuses to have its openings simply sitting unconnected in the skin; they’re surrounded on all sides by more skin.”

“And so when you held your nose—“

“It influenced the course of the spell,” Thomas said smugly. “The magic reaches back to the caster, and relies on the presence of an uncut nose to work. Jing-Xi thinks that those people with damaged noses, say, broken in battle, are the ones who can least successfully cast it. I hold my nose, and the magic can’t sense either a wound or the ordinary place it depends on for its anchor. So it turns inside out and becomes this unbroken sphere instead.” He grinned up at the white sphere. He held his hand out, and it came and hovered over his fingers, never quite alighting.

“That’s really strange,” said Harry, unable to help himself.

“No, it’s not,” Thomas said absently, still gazing at the sphere. Harry studied it, too, but it wasn’t like a crystal ball; he couldn’t see a reflection or a trace of a vision. It simply existed as a dove-colored round object. “It all makes sense. It’s just that, most of the time, all the laws of magic are interconnected at levels that we ignore, or never suspect exist. But we’re studying them right now.”

“Do you think you’ll ever understand them all successfully?” Harry asked, intrigued despite himself. Thomas’s attitude towards magic in general reminded him of his attitude towards magical creatures. It did not really matter if the laws, or the magical species, had an impact on the future course of wizarding society, or were useful. It was enough that they existed.

“Of course not,” said Thomas, looking momentarily distressed. “Or, at least, I hope that I’m dead by the time it happens, if it does. How boring, to live in a world like that.”

He went back to peering at the sphere, and Harry went back to watching him and smiling, because he couldn’t restrain that much of

his amusement. He'd intended to ask Thomas if he'd found any traces of magical contamination in Draco's body.

But given Thomas's expression and the sudden, slow revolution of the sphere for no discernible reason, that could wait.

Chapter Eighty-Five: A Dagger Through the Vitals

“Sir! Sir!”

Rufus woke with a half-shout, staggering up from the middle of his bed. He blinked for a moment, and then frowned when he saw the room lit only by the glare of the green flames from the hearth. He habitually left his Floo connection open to a select number of people, so they could fetch him if there was an emergency at the Ministry in the middle of the night, but he didn't recognize the woman whose head hovered there now.

“Is something wrong, Madam?” he asked gruffly, trying to look as dignified as he could while beneath the sheets in his pyjamas. A dressing gown hung on the back of the bed, luckily, and he slung it around his shoulders while he watched her closely.

“I'm sorry, sir.” The witch covered her mouth with one hand and looked down. Rufus saw the crossed wand-and-bone emblem of St. Mungo's on her shoulder, and doubted that it was because of any embarrassment at seeing a near-naked man on her part. More likely, embarrassment at disturbing the Minister out of his sound night's sleep. “But you did ask us to let you know if she ever woke up, and they said this was the Floo connection to use during the night, not the one in your office, and—“

“If whom ever woke up?” Rufus asked, baffled. There were patients in St. Mungo's whose awakening would have been cause for rejoicing, old comrades of his put into comas by Death Eater curses during the First War, but Rufus couldn't remember the last time he'd actually hoped for that.

“Fiona Mallory, sir.” The witch seemed to shrink in front of him as he stared at her. “The, er, the Auror arrested and sacked for the torture of Harry Potter's parents, sir? She went into a coma from a Dark magical artifact, and now she's awake.”

Rufus felt his heart give a single hard pound, and then he was fully awake and committed to the situation. Fiona had been one of his finest Aurors before she let her own anger at the abusive Potters get

the better of her. He had never been able to shake the sensation that her sudden sleep was revenge more than an accident with Dark magic, even as he'd had to admit failure and move her from the Ministry to St. Mungo's. "I did leave instructions to know at once if that happened. How did she wake up?"

The witch swallowed loudly, and Rufus realized then that some of the pallor in her face came from fear. "Un—Unspeakables, sir. They came into her room with a kind of wand that held all of us motionless. When they touched her with it, it glowed blue, and she w-woke up."

Rufus hissed. It made sense that the Unspeakables would possess an artifact that could end Mallory's coma. They probably had the one that had dropped her into it in the first place. "And where is Fiona now?"

The witch cringed.

"Madam?" Rufus asked softly.

"The Un—Unspeakables gave her a Portkey," said the Healer, so softly that Rufus almost couldn't hear her. "She was saying something about speaking to Harry when she vanished." She peered at him with wide, frightened eyes. "Has she gone to talk to the vates, then, sir?"

"Yes," Rufus said shortly, only because she would spread rumors if he didn't acknowledge this somehow. Damn it, damn it, damn it. The last thing that needed to happen was Harry confronting his parents' torturer in the middle of the night. Of course, it was probably something the Stone would find amusing.

What are you playing at now, rock?

"Thank you for contacting me," he told the witch, and snuffed out the Floo connection with a wave of his wand. Then he hurried to put on the dressing gown and cast a handful of Floo powder into the hearth, hoping against hope that he would not need to call long before his target awakened.

“Headmistress’s Office, Hogwarts!”

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Harry felt the surprised quiver of the wards before he even opened his eyes. He was already rolling into a battle-prepared posture, feeling Draco’s loose clasp on him suddenly turn firm. He cast a silent Summoning Charm for Draco’s wand, and heard it smack into his palm.

Then he opened his eyes.

A woman stood in front of him whom he didn’t recognize at first, gaunt and starveling, her hair straggling like a mass of twigs around her face, her blue eyes sunken in her head. She clutched the Portkey that seemed to have brought her straight through the wards as if it would keep her from falling. Harry narrowed his eyes. The Portkey wasn’t the bit of rubbish touched with Portus that usually served well enough. It was a small, key-shaped piece of silver, and it shone with such magic that Harry immediately brought some of his own power up in defense.

“Auror Mallory?” he asked slowly. The last thing he’d known, she lay in a coma from an accident with a Dark magical artifact, and she wasn’t likely to wake up soon.

“Harry,” she whispered, and stared at him some more.

“She’s not supposed to be here,” Draco said, his arms tightening so much that Harry almost couldn’t breathe. “How did she get through the wards? What does she want? Be careful, Harry.”

“I know,” Harry murmured, his puzzlement increasing when Auror Mallory simply stood there. Someone had exercised her muscles for her, probably by magic, while she lay in bed, but they were still thin blobs of meat around sticks. She certainly didn’t make a very efficient assassin. Who would send her, anyway? Why not send someone else to kill me? “But—” He shook his head, and decided that just because they were speaking about her as if she wasn’t there didn’t

mean she had to stand there silent and gaping. "Auror Mallory," he said gently. "Fiona. What are you here for? Who did this to you?"

Her eyes came painfully alive, and she took a single staggering step forward. "They rescued me," she whispered. "The ones who put me in the blackness in the first place, they rescued me and sent me back."

"Who?" Harry asked.

"The Unspeakables."

I thought the Stone was staying out of politics, Harry thought, even as he had to admit that it wasn't a very political move to wake up a sleeping woman and send her to him. Even if that woman had tortured his parents. Harry felt an uneasy consciousness stirring and struggling in him; he thought he should probably hate her more than he did for that, but Lily and James had been put so thoroughly into his past that it was like trying to remember a hatred from a hundred years ago. "Why did they send you back?" he asked. "Why release you?"

"They wanted you to know," Mallory said, and then bowed her head and began shivering. Harry cast a Warming Charm on her, eye all the while on the silver Portkey. It simply shone.

"Why aren't you fetching Professor Snape?" Draco hissed to the back of his neck. "You should be."

"I won't hear what she has to say if someone takes her away now," Harry pointed out. He thought this was eminently reasonable, and didn't understand why Draco lifted his wrist as if he would cast the phoenix communication spell. "No." He forced Draco's hand down, and turned to look at Auror Mallory again. "What did they want me to know?" It would probably be a lie, even if she sincerely believed it, but that didn't matter. Harry didn't have to act on Unspeakable lies any more. If the matter required it, he would go and face the Stone down again in the Department of Mysteries. The anger surging through him was certainly strong enough for that.

"Know—" Mallory squeezed her eyes shut, and stood a moment as if debating whether to tell him the truth. Harry, his magical senses

raised to a high pitch because he expected the silver Portkey to do something spectacular, felt it when the wards on the Slytherin common room quivered and then admitted someone. He grimaced. Merlin knows how Snape found out about this so fast, but maybe he felt her come through the wards, too.

“Know that I only tortured your parents later,” said Mallory suddenly, opening her eyes. “The first person who tortured them was Lucius Malfoy.”

Harry felt the moment when the words tore through him, a dagger through the vitals, a steel blade that impaled and twisted his guts out of line. He wanted to bend over and feel at the wound beating inside him, judge how badly he was hurt.

But he heard Draco draw a pained breath at the same time, and forced himself through the moment by remembering he wasn't the only person with a stake in this. He scooted backward and wrapped one arm around Draco's shoulders and one around his waist, drawing him against him. He held him there while he gazed at Mallory. “What did he do to them?” he asked, surprising himself with the flat calm of his own voice. “And when? Do you know?”

“Not long before I was arrested,” she said, voice becoming more lively, as if the memories sparked more strength in her. “The same day. I was there to take the fall for him, just in case someone suspected that something was wrong with the wards on your parents' cells.” Harry saw a flash of contempt deep in her eyes, even now, for Lily and James. He supposed they didn't stop being abusers to Mallory just because they'd hurt. “I know he did something bad to them. Something painful, worse than the battle curses I used. I don't know what it was.”

Harry nodded tightly, and felt the touch of wet breath on his neck as Draco made a torn noise of disbelief. “Hush,” he whispered, then looked at Mallory. “And this is true?”

“I swear it is.” Mallory smiled, a bit bitterly. “Scrimgeour sacked me after that, because he thought I'd overstepped the boundary of my duties—”

"You did," Harry murmured. He could feel Snape now, trying his best to open the door of their bedroom. Harry lifted locking wards his guardian couldn't get through and continued stroking Draco's back, gaze focused on Mallory.

"How would I have come into contact with a Dark artifact held in the Ministry?" Mallory spread her hands. "The Unspeakables did it for him, put me into that coma. And they took me out again. I don't know why. I don't know anything about them. But I swear that everything else is the truth."

I can't be allies with Lucius any more.

But this is Draco's father, and saying that is like saying I won't be Draco's lover any more.

Harry felt the first impact of Snape's magic against the wards, and sighed. He would be in here in a moment, and he would probably attempt to kill Mallory first and ask questions later. He was in that kind of mood, from the sound of it. "I'll tell everyone else. You should go. Do you have a safe place?"

Mallory blinked. "You—you care about that? I tortured your parents!"

"You did." Harry stared at her some more, and still there was a void of feeling where he should have expected raw anger and pain. Probably, the rest of it just hurts too much. And the silent sobbing Draco was now giving against him increased his own emotions towards other people, not Mallory. "But I think I forgave you for it. And you've told me who really instigated the torment. So I think you can go." He shuddered as Snape's wandless magic nearly managed to penetrate a weak place in his wards, and added, "Not for very much longer, though."

Mallory nodded. "The Unspeakables swore they would see me safe," she said, and clenched her hand around the Portkey, and tilted back her head, and dissolved into a mass of silver sparks, and was gone.

Harry lowered the wards and lay down on the bed with his arms folded around Draco, still rubbing his spine, still letting Draco cling to him like a young monkey, and now murmuring soothing words. “Draco, I’ll never make you choose. I promise. He’s your father. I know that. I respect that. You don’t have to choose between us. I promise that—“

And then the door flew open, and Snape was there, and perhaps it was better that Harry hadn’t promised anything, because the memory of the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow were coming back to him, and what he had promised to do to anyone who broke them, and the fact that Ignifer had told him the Unspeakables had threatened her father. Cupressus Apollonis had not broken. Would Lucius, who owed an actual debt to the Unspeakables in the form of Mallory, have done so? And what might he have given them if he did?

Not what, Harry thought, his mind landing as if by fate on the fact that they still didn’t know who had betrayed Hawthorn as a werewolf to the Ministry. Who.

Snape bowed over him, saying harshly, “What happened? Are you hurt?”

“Not physically,” said Harry, sinking his emotions into the Occlumency pools. Snape’s sharp glance said he knew what Harry was doing and did not approve, but Harry ignored him. This was too important. He needed to view his situation as an outsider and keep moving forward, or the pain would cripple him. “Fiona Mallory woke from her coma. The Auror who tortured my parents?” he supplied, when he saw the confusion in Snape’s eyes. “She said that she did cast curses on them, but she was the fall witch for Lucius. He tortured them in more depth and detail.”

Snape closed his eyes, and his mouth tightened for a long moment. Harry curled up more around Draco.

“I am taking you both to the hospital wing,” Snape said, as the small, frantic sounds that Draco was making soared. “He needs a Calming Draught.”

Harry knew that Snape would pour a potion down his throat, too, if Harry gave him the chance. He would not give him the chance. His Occlumency would serve him well enough, to let him think about this.

And he had to think.

But he could see the path sprouting ahead of him, leading him, step by dismal step, to the end of draining Lucius Malfoy of his magic.

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Draco couldn't breathe that well. He could hear Madam Pomfrey speaking to him in a low, worried voice, trying to get him to uncurl from around Harry and swallow a Calming Draught. Now and then she would stop and ask Professor Snape for some report on his symptoms, and whether he still thought Draco needed the potion. And all the while Harry held him and didn't stop moving his hand on his back.

They probably thought he refused to uncurl because he was ashamed, Draco thought, or because he was frightened about what would happen to his father if Harry went after him.

He wasn't, or else that was only in some part of his mind which the main emotion he felt wouldn't let him access. He was murderously angry.

Did he have to be so stubborn? So stupid? He tortured the Potters because he was taking the place of Harry as vengeance-taker, I know. But he knew, he had to have known, that this was one of the cases where the victim waived not just his right to take vengeance but the right to vengeance altogether. He should have come to Harry, talked to him, asked him about this. And then Harry would have had the means of outright refusal, instead of finding out now

What he did was wrong. I know how the tradition functions. Someone else can take revenge if the abused child doesn't take it, but he has to have the child's permission. The only exceptions are blood family. Connor could have done this, but not Lucius.

And he thought he was high enough above the old laws and rules to ignore them all. He thought they didn't apply to him.

I am so fucking tired of having Harry be a better guardian of the Malfoy honor than my father is.

At last, he heard Pomfrey and Snape discussing a spell to make him look up, and that was when he decided that he'd had quite enough of that. He uncramped his limbs, and when Harry gave him a long, anxious look, nodded. He could sit up on his own. He could.

"Has anyone contacted my mother?" he asked, attempting to ignore the fact that his voice was hoarse and his face splotched from his tears of fury. Madam Pomfrey came towards him with a Calming Draught. Harry held out his hand and prevented her from doing so, eyes on Draco's face all the while.

"No, Draco," he said quietly. "We didn't know if you'd want that done. Would you like it done?"

Draco nodded once. Harry bowed his head slightly, then started to move away from the bed and towards the hospital wing's fireplace.

"Harry?"

He got a look in return that made him shiver, it seemed so cold and uncaring, until he realized that Harry had locked down his emotions in order to function. Well, that makes sense. "Yes?"

"Are you going to kill my father, or drain him of his magic?" Draco was proud of his voice. It didn't waver. It didn't even make it sound as though those were things that might or might not happen. It made it sound as though those were the only two alternatives, and Harry had to make one or the other of them come true.

"I don't know," said Harry quietly. "It would depend on what he did to my parents. And—to other people."

He took a handful of Floo powder before Draco could ask what that meant, and cast it into the fire with a call of, "Number Twelve Grimmauld Place!"

"Mr. Malfoy," Pomfrey said, almost shoving the vial in his face. "I do insist that you swallow this. You are too on edge right now."

"I am not on edge," said Draco, and thank Merlin, he could use his voice like a rapier, not like the wound spring he had suspected it might uncoil as. Pomfrey actually took a step away from him. "I am angry. I am mourning the downfall of my family honor. I am plotting ways to let my father know how disappointed I am in him before he dies. That's all."

"Let him be, Poppy," said Professor Snape quietly.

The matron glanced between both of them, then threw up her hands and stomped away, muttering about Slytherins. Snape took another step forward, eyes focused intently on Draco. Draco leaned forward and looked back. This was a man he hadn't seen in at least a week, since Snape had visited him in the hospital wing after the battle with Falco Parkinson: his Head of House.

"You know that your father may not survive the morning," Snape said.

"I know it," said Draco, and he did, and amidst all the pain that he wasn't going to admit to was the clean, sharp sawing of his anger. He really did feel that—not just because he wanted to, but because he did. It swept him up in pride. He was a fitting Malfoy heir after all, in a way that his father had not been for years. "He betrayed our name. He betrayed our honor. He has to die. Or lose his magic," he added. "That was the punishment Harry laid out for violating the oaths of the Alliance, and I would be content with that."

"Lucius would rather die than lose his magic," Snape said.

"I know that," Draco said.

"You are not mourning the loss of your father?"

Draco curled his lip. "I would be mourning it far more if I thought there was a chance he'd been under Imperius, or otherwise coaxed into doing these things," he said. "As it is—no. He knew what the consequences of getting caught were, and one of the first lessons he taught me was not getting caught. He should have known better."

Snape nodded and paced slowly away from the bed towards Harry, who was talking to Narcissa through the fireplace. Draco leaned back on the pillow and closed his eyes.

He did mean it. Lucius had always slipped through the nooses and traps his enemies laid because he took grand risks, but no unnecessary ones. He had been growing more reckless of late, as his disownment of Draco showed, and the moment a Malfoy took a risk and failed, he became contemptible.

Unless he really was under Imperius.

But he hadn't been. And he hadn't been when he was a Death Eater, either, even if he had managed to convince the Wizengamot he was.

Draco flinched a bit as he recalled one of his very first serious conversations with Harry, back in first year, when Harry had insisted that, yes, Lucius was a Death Eater, and calmly detailed his crimes. Draco had refused to believe it then—because he loved his father, but even more because he could not believe that the proud, elegant man he knew would leave evidence of his crimes behind if he had really performed them of his own free will. So he had been under Imperius. He had to have been.

But he wasn't.

And you tortured three Muggleborn children and their parents to death, Father, and left signs that you did so. You killed the Prewett twins, but only in company with four other wizards. Your deeds in war are of a piece with what you have done in the last year.

For the good of the family, Lucius Malfoy had to cease to be a wizard.

Draco took a deep breath, glad now that he'd learned the pureblood dances, glad that he'd been raised a pureblood. This made things easier when someone in the family had a horrible breach of taste or committed a horrendous crime. Other families would hang on their necks and cry and let themselves be dragged down, too. Draco had had the training to cut a useless blood relative out of his heart quickly and easily. The family must survive.

And then his mother came through the flames, and put her arms around him, and Draco allowed himself just a bit of comfort from knowing that someone else did feel the howling sadness and the pain within him.

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Hawthorn paused. A letter lay on the table beside her bed. It had not lain there a moment ago, she knew. She had only turned her back to retrieve her hairbrush, which had fallen, and when she straightened, there it was.

Cautiously, she picked up her wand and approached, casting several spells on the way. No charms were revealed on the letter, only, strangely enough, the fading glow of Apparition, as if it had managed to transport itself.

The parchment was gray, and folded so as to make its own envelope. The seal holding it shut was black, an hourglass. Hawthorn Levitated the letter into the air and carefully slit the seal with a Cutting Curse, making the parchment fall open.

The words were written in an elegant, slashing hand, easily read from the careful distance she stood at. There was only one sentence.

Lucius Malfoy was the one who betrayed you to the Unspeakables, and through them to the Aurors.

Hawthorn stared. She felt old rage coursing through her like lava beneath solid rock. It was easily roused. She had had dreams, lately—such dreams, hard to remember, but still present in tattered pieces in her mind when she woke, of running after the Aurors who

had mistreated her when she was in Tullianum, or Indigena Yaxley, or the mysterious person who had been the one to betray her werewolf status, and biting them. She wanted it so much. The hatred was a black beast beside her in the dreams, always present for the bite, and always giving her a moment of dark satisfaction before she finally woke.

But this—

This was confirmation. If she dared to think it was. The Unspeakables could have sent this letter through her wards. They could also be lying, trying to set Harry's allies against one another.

But a part of Hawthorn's mind she rarely used now, the part that had reveled in the name of the Red Death when she ran with Voldemort, woke and stretched and applied itself with rapid calculation to the possibilities.

Was Lucius ruthless enough to betray an ally like this? Yes, if it would gain him something greater. Hawthorn did not know what else it might have won him, but she knew the great prize: more unimpeded access to and influence over Harry. Lucius and Harry had had their first falling out around the time of the werewolf rebellion—just before it, in fact. And if Lucius had betrayed her to the Unspeakables, he might have hoped that he would have some more say over Harry's actions with Hawthorn gone.

It had probably been nothing personal. The Unspeakables wanted werewolves. Had they demanded one of Lucius? They probably had. And he had given them one close to Harry, close enough that it would hurt Harry when she was taken. That it had provoked Harry into organized rebellion instead of mad scrambling was simply Lucius and the Department's bad luck.

That doesn't mean he did it, Hawthorn counseled herself, trying to keep down the howl of the wolf inside her. It was still near the dark of the moon, but even now, a provocation like this was enough to rouse the beast. It means only that he had an opportunity to do so, and perhaps a motive.

And the Unspeakables would hardly have told this to her now out of the kindness of their hearts.

With a hand that trembled, Hawthorn took the letter, folded it up, and put it into her robe pocket. Then she tapped her wrist with her wand to activate the phoenix song communication spell. She would do nothing hastily. She would not rush off to confront Lucius, as the Unspeakables had probably hoped.

She would contact Harry. She would ask him if he thought there was a possibility of this being true, and if so, what they should do.

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Lucius also found a letter on his breakfast table that morning. He nodded. He had expected it. Gray parchment, black hourglass seal. When the piled stones began to fall at last, he had expected they would come from this direction, the most vulnerable place.

We have told them, the letter said. Harry and Hawthorn Parkinson. They will be here soon.

Lucius laughed, a little, and stood from the table to check that his defenses were ready. Since he was found out, what he could do was face his coming fate like a man. Some disgraced purebloods could recoup a bit of honor to their names by admitting to accusations they knew were true and accepting execution or maiming or a duel, whichever the accuser chose.

He did not quite intend to go that far. It was only fools who did. And Lucius knew what honor was worth, and the answer was not his life.

But he would give what credit he could to the Malfoy name, for the sake of the son who would bear it after him.

And, thanks to the Unspeakables' eagerness to make sure he knew just what was going to happen to him, he had extra time to prepare.

He shook his head in amused disbelief as he went into his study. I hope that Harry considers the trade in allies he's just made fair.

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Harry watched Narcissa and Draco embrace in silence, and tried to decide what to do.

Birds of fright wheeled and scattered in his thoughts whenever he tried to attend to them without the Occlumency pools. Therefore, he didn't try to attend to them without the Occlumency pools. He kept his emotions pinned, because they couldn't help him in this case, and considered his options.

Execution of Lucius was one possibility, for overstepping his bounds. But Harry had refused that option with most of the people who had hurt him, his parents included, and he would not embrace it now.

Turning him over to the Ministry for trial would work—if only he could be sure that the Unspeakables would not touch him there, if only he could be sure that the Wizengamot would actually find him guilty this time and not be swayed by Malfoy money and Malfoy charisma into letting him go. No, much as he would have liked to, Harry could not say that he trusted the Ministry to conduct an objective trial of Lucius Malfoy.

Cowing him as he had Henrietta and binding him with Unbreakable Vows would perhaps have been a choice if Harry thought he possessed the power to grind Lucius's temperament into gravel. But he did not, and Lucius Malfoy was not Henrietta Bulstrode. He might pretend to bow his neck, but he would wriggle and test the slack in his bonds, and find some way to get around the Vows, Harry was sure. Besides, intense anger at Henrietta for the way she had treated Edith had been his main impetus to bind her, not the injury Henrietta had done him.

If he harmed Hawthorn, his thoughts whispered, could you not find the anger to bind Lucius?

But if he harmed Hawthorn, then he had done it while a member of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. And he had been subject to its oaths then, and there was only one punishment for that. Harry had

said he would drain the magic of anyone who betrayed a comrade rather than simply withdrawing from the Alliance.

He closed his eyes. He would have found this so much easier if not for Draco.

“Harry?”

It took him a moment to realize that the voice came from his wrist; he had been so caught up in his thoughts that he hadn’t heard the warble of phoenix song. And, ah, it was Hawthorn’s voice.

“Mrs. Parkinson,” Harry murmured, glad his own voice did not shake. “What is the matter?”

“I’ve received a letter saying that Lucius Malfoy betrayed me to the Unspeakables,” said Hawthorn. “I need—I need to come to Hogwarts and speak to you about this. May I?”

Harry heard the soft sounds from Draco’s direction cease. He looked, because he couldn’t help himself, and saw Draco leaning in the shelter of his mother’s arms, eyes fixed on his. Harry looked straight into his boyfriend’s face, and could not look away.

He saw Draco mouth, “Tell her yes.”

As if in a dream, Harry lowered his mouth towards his wrist and said, “Of course, Hawthorn. Come ahead. I’m in the hospital wing.”

“Wounded?” Hawthorn’s voice grew sharp. Harry marveled at her strength, that even bound up in her own pain she would spare a moment’s thought for what might have happened to him.

“No,” said Harry. “Just in shock, a bit. Please do come ahead, Hawthorn.” He ended the communication spell when he heard her assent, and looked again at Draco and Narcissa, not believing what he saw in their faces.

Draco spoke before his mother could. “Drain him, Harry.”

“Draco, he’s your father—“

“He betrayed her,” said Draco stonily. “You don’t do that, not when the ally has never done you any harm. And not when you can get caught.” He shifted restlessly closer to Narcissa, but Harry thought he was offering comfort as much as seeking it. “And he put you in an impossible position politically, and he knew it. And he didn’t think about what the effect would be on you, of knowing that your parents suffered. He just tortured them because he wanted to, because he could. He doesn’t think about other people, and the only time a Malfoy can afford to do that is when he doesn’t have any dependents or any allies. He had both.” Draco’s face was eerie in its intense conviction. “Drain him, and keep his power for yourself. His magic is the only thing of value he has left to offer, now.”

Harry looked at Narcissa.

“If he did all that Mrs. Mallory and Mrs. Parkinson have said,” said Narcissa, after a moment of long, long silence, “then I must agree, Harry. I am—I am the one who sought Hawthorn out, who brought her into this alliance with you. I did it intending her nothing but good, as well as knowing that she would make a wonderful loyalist for you if you could persuade her. It is like the maneuvering I did on your behalf in the third year; I intended nothing but good, and still I wrought you harm. I have wrought her harm, exposed her to my husband’s attention. I knew that he was conducting correspondence with someone mysterious in the days before Hawthorn was arrested. I should have picked up the clues.”

“Mrs. Malfoy—“

“Narcissa, Harry. Call me by the name I have most claim to. And I say that I should have picked up on them. The standard that most matters in such a thing is the witch’s. I failed my own.” Narcissa leaned her head on Draco’s hair, pale and silent.

Harry closed his eyes and nodded, even as he heard, faint and far away, the “pop” of Apparition as Hawthorn appeared on the edge of Hogwarts grounds.

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Lucius felt the moment Harry, Draco, Narcissa, Severus, and Hawthorn arrived on the outer defenses of the Manor. Of course, the first three of them could have passed through the wards without trouble, linked to them as they were, but the presence of the fourth and fifth kept them excluded.

Lucius waited, calmly, at the door to his study. On one side of him was a stack of papers and ledgers that Draco would need to examine to know the intricacies of the Malfoy legacy. Lucius had played him no tricks, but that did not mean that what he must keep track of was simple.

On the other side of him stood a single vial with three drops of clear fluid in it.

In his hand was his wand.

He waited, and lowered the wards when he felt Harry begin to drain them. He did not want his home damaged. It would be Draco's home thereafter, and the home of the heirs Draco adopted. It was not, strictly speaking, Lucius's property to expose to the spells of his enemies anymore.

He could taste their wariness as they ventured inside, looking for traps all the way. Lucius had not trapped the rooms, however. They would discover that eventually, and come to him. He was willing to while the moments away by running his plan through his head, though he knew it was perfect; he wished to admire the angles and the cleverness of it. And sooner or later, they would arrive at the door of the study, and see him, and pause.

They did. Severus was in the front, beside Harry, and Lucius was glad, because they would be able to identify the Veritaserum Lucius picked up and swallowed even from a short distance.

The brief, cloudy dullness of the drug came over him. However, Lucius fully planned on telling the truth even without prompting, without questions, and so the numbness faded.

He looked Harry in the eye, and said, "I used a species of insect on your father that will give him cancer in a short time. They should remain even though he is drained of magic. The answer as to how to defeat them is there." He gestured to the book on medical magic he'd placed among the Malfoy ledgers. "I cast a spell on your mother that will stretch her dying moment to an eternity of suffering. You can take that away by using your absorbere gift, I am certain."

"Did you betray me?" Hawthorn asked, shouldering Harry and Severus aside so that she could see him. Lucius lifted his head and studied her, letting his mouth reply without hindrance.

"I did."

And then things fell out as he had known they would. Lucius felt almost as if he were the piper and led his foes the dance.

Hawthorn howled and charged at him. Lucius had known her rage and hatred would compel that; even though she was a controlled witch most of the time, she hated traitors, always had, and she had a werewolf's temper urging her on now. He lifted his wand and cast the complicated illusion spell he'd practiced until he could do it nonverbally.

The spell took form in the air between them, in enough time that Hawthorn had to stop and watch it. It reached into Hawthorn's memory and tugged out the image of her child dying—it had to be her child, because her dead husband had not been her mate—and played it again in front of her.

Lucius listened, timing out the moments, feeling the stunned immobility of the others melting instant by instant, and heard only the wolf in Hawthorn's voice when she howled again.

She came at him without mercy, but also without coordination, and her wand was half-forgotten in the overpowering, pressing need to grip him in her jaws or shred him with her nails. The book on werewolves had said it would be so. The pack instinct was strong in them, and they could be fooled by the spell into thinking that

someone who had not actually killed their child or mate was the murderer.

Lucius flicked his wand again, and sang the second spell he'd prepared in his mind. *Argenteus!*

A series of silver blades formed in midair between him and Hawthorn, and flicked forward, studding her shoulders, her arms, her torso. The shock did not kill her at once, as it would have with a normal human, but it bore her to the ground, and then she howled once in such pain that Severus bent over to help her.

Lucius had debated in his mind whether Harry would bend over to help Hawthorn, too, but he did not think so, and he was proven right as Harry stood where he was, staring, eyes focused on him.

It was too bad, really, that he had to be exiled from such power, Lucius thought, watching even as he felt the winds begin to build and knew Harry was gathering his magic to swallow Lucius's own. He should have trusted his insight that night when Harry had declared the Alliance. Here was a wizard worth serving, strength worth being close to—might, as he had described it, once, long ago, to his son.

But that might was not worth losing his own magic to, and so, before Harry could overcome his own shock and doubt and personal pain long enough to drain him, Lucius touched the Portkey that shone around his neck, in the form of the top button of his robe, and flickered out of his study into the room behind it. At his gesture, wards sprang up around the open door to the study, blue and green and softly flickering. Lucius had shown no one else these wards, not even his beloved Narcissa. His father had impressed on him the need to keep them secret and safe, and so Lucius had always done. Those wards, the product of an Unassailable Curse, would only allow someone of Malfoy blood to pass into this room, and they could not be destroyed, anchored as they were in the actual flesh and tissue of the line, unless all living Malfoys were already dead. Lucius thought the ancestor who designed them must have faced an absorbere at some point.

Narcissa pressed forward, and was thrown back. Harry tried to drain them, and the wards slipped away from him and snarled. Lucius did lock eyes with both of them, and try to give them a final farewell and a summation of all they had meant to him and what he thought of them now.

Draco slid past his mother, and into the room.

An expression of shock came over his features, holding him in place. Lucius had known that would happen. He spoke swiftly to his son, even as one hand shot behind him to hover above the powerful Portkey they would have sensed at once if he carried it on him.

“You are my pride, Draco. Though I had little enough to do with it that I am ashamed of myself, you have become a man, and a rightful heir to the Malfoy line. The best of your mother is in you, and of me as well. You are not a subordinate to Harry, I see that now, and you will do our blood proud.”

The Veritaserum in his body would not let him speak less than the truth. Lucius used that as a double-edged sword. It let him tell this young wizard, less than a month from his seventeenth birthday and thus from coming of age, with his blond hair half-tousled behind him from the wind of his speed and his wand raised in an attack position and his body coiled in a defensive posture, what he really thought of him.

And the words, so unlike what Draco expected to hear, kept him frozen in place one extra moment, the moment his father needed.

Lucius grasped the Portkey.

The Manor dissolved around him, shutting out the sight of Draco's lunge and the curse he tried to cast, which Lucius was sure went through his fading form and destroyed the desk he'd been standing in front of. He felt a moment's faint regret. He had liked that desk.

He landed on a desolate heath, and glanced around with a resigned expression. Finvarra Malfoy had not chosen the prettiest of the Malfoy properties to make the safehouse. Of course, if she had, then

sooner or later a child would have contrived to kill his or parent so that they could safely inherit it.

And the house, though small, would keep Lucius comfortably enough, alive and safe behind wards that no one else could pass, because no one else was a part of the oldest living generation of Malfoys.

He ducked into the house, and the wards closed around him. Lucius took off his cloak with a sigh and a shake of his shoulders.

The house was cold, but a wave of his wand lit the hearth. He was thirsty, but a few charms summoned him a glass and an old bottle of wine. Lucius had been saving it for the day that his son came of age. He felt no qualms in opening it now, even though he had always envisioned sharing it with Draco in proud silence. He had seen that Draco was already an adult, birthday here yet or no.

He drank, sitting calmly in front of the fire, and cast the Summoning Charm to call a book on the history of the merfolk to him. It was a subject he had long meant to study, and had never had the time to look at before.

Merlin, he loved being a wizard.

Chapter Eighty-Six: The Last of the Potters

Harry did not wait for Draco to come out of the warded room from which Lucius had vanished, although he heard Draco curse and curse, the second one destroying a desk. Snape had called him back with a low hiss to Hawthorn's side, and Harry was stooping over her, seeing the red lines of infection spreading out from each embedded silver knife.

"We must take her to Hogwarts," said Snape, with what Harry recognized as one of his more controlled expressions. "I do not have potions that can stop silver poisoning here. She will need more than salve to insure that she heals correctly, this time; she will need the potions, and careful applications of medical magic so that she does not scar." He was holding his hands away from Hawthorn's blood, Harry noted, wary of the lycanthropic infection, even though it was the dark of the moon. "And there may be supplies we can only fetch from St. Mungo's, which will be a problem. They still make it a policy not to treat known werewolves if they can get away with it, and Hawthorn bears the Dark Mark as well."

"Leave that to me," Harry said quietly, staring at Hawthorn all the while. Silver studded her like a collar, a collar put around her life. Harry could feel an enormous weariness on her behalf. So much suffering she has endured, and still no end in sight. He put out his hand, and Hawthorn rose from the floor, Levitated in comfort. Luckily, she was already unconscious from the shock and pain. "I'll take her back to Hogwarts. You make sure Draco and Narcissa are all right."

Snape nodded, and then Harry was running steadily back through Malfoy Manor, Hawthorn skimming beside him. He steered her around corners and over furniture they'd examined for traps, letting his magic and his muscles do more of the thinking for him than his mind.

There were so many things to be done.

There were so many things he was not looking forward to doing.

But he had to do them, so Harry carefully balled up his emotions and sank them, and then reached the outside of Malfoy Manor with Hawthorn and Apparated away.

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“We need Argent-Free Potions,” said Madam Pomfrey, with a helpless shake of her head. “They’ve just been developed to help werewolves recover from silver poisoning—it hasn’t been a large area of research, for obvious reasons—and I don’t know all the ingredients, so I can’t just ask Severus to brew them. And the only place in Britain that has them which I know of is St. Mungo’s, to treat the few registered werewolves who don’t mind the stigma.”

“Then we’ll get them,” said Harry, and stepped away from the hospital bed. Hawthorn looked slightly better. Madam Pomfrey had spelled the knives away and used a combination of salve and potion to stop the progress of the wounds. Silver poisoning was as hard to remove as most curses, however, and the list of side effects Hawthorn might suffer from it was long, even if she stopped short of dying: brain damage, loss of ability to speak, a weakening in her magic, amnesia. Not to mention the scars. The scars, Harry knew, could well be most damaging to a pureblood witch of Hawthorn’s pride. “I’ll get them, from St. Mungo’s.” He walked towards the fireplace.

“How do you think you’re going to do that?” Madam Pomfrey’s voice was slightly scandalized.

Harry glanced back at her. She took a step away from him. Distantly, Harry wondered what his face showed, anger or blankness, and which she would have found more frightening. "Simple," he said. "I'm the Boy-Who-Lived."

He cast a handful of Floo powder into the flames, and called “St. Mungo’s!” as he stepped into them.

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Harry found himself emerging from the fireplace in a large, quiet, pale room that seemed designed to calm people who might stumble into it

at the middle of the night shrieking about their or someone else's magical accident. The walls were a light foamy blue, and the paintings were exclusively of landscapes, mostly mountainous ones that faded into purple and more blue, with exotic magical animals moving around in them. Harry gave his head a shake when he felt his muscles half-uncoiling. There are wards that try to get you to relax, too. He fought them off.

The door opened a moment later, and a witch with large laughing eyes and a weary face stepped into the room. "Hello, can I help—" She cut herself off with a stare, obviously recognizing him.

Harry nodded to her. "There's been a horrible fight," he said, and opened a rent in one Occlumency pool to leak pain and fear into his voice. He would use the power of his name and reputation to win what Hawthorn needed, but he was not adverse to doing even more than that, and appearing like an abused child. If other people were so determined to see him that way, he might as well oblige them when it could get him what he wanted. "A—a curse on a friend of mine. Practically a foster mother." He looked down, clenching his hands together as if he were trying with all his might not to weep. In reality, the inside of his mind had never been so dry. "She's a werewolf, and someone used the Argenteus curse on her."

The witch gave a little gasp, and Harry looked up to see her eyes glistening with tears. Yet she did cling to the questions that Harry supposed they were trained to ask in such situations. "Is she registered, dear?"

Harry gave a little sniff and nod. "Everyone knows she's a werewolf. That's wh-why the enemy chose the curse for her that he did. He wanted to destroy her." He let his voice sink, having decided a whisper was better than a wail. "He wanted to destroy me."

"Oh, my dear," the Healer murmured, and then pulled herself back on course with an obvious effort. "And she's willing to pay for the potions that she'll need to reverse the infection?"

"I'm going to pay for them!" Harry judged it worthwhile to add some indignation to his tone. "She's like a mother to me. I can't let her die!"

"Of course not." The Healer licked her lips. Luckily, Harry thought, she didn't need to ask if he could afford the Argent-Free potions, since everyone in Britain by this point knew he was the Black heir. "And what's her name, child?"

"H-Hawthorn Parkinson."

"The Death Eater?"

"The mother," Harry corrected, and now he let the wail out. "The woman who's lost her daughter and husband, and been imprisoned unfairly, and suffered from the stigma of lycanthropy, and who's going to die in just a little while if you can't give me something right now!"

Harry didn't know if it was his performance or the magic that rose up around him, rattling the paintings on the walls, that decided the Healer. Either way, she gave a brisk nod, blonde curls bouncing, and then said, "I'll be right back with the Argent-Free potions, dear." The door opened and shut behind her.

Harry flicked a hand and cast the Tempus charm. He would give her five minutes before he went after her.

She was back in four, clutching four small stoppered bottles, three of blue glass and one of green. "She must take the one in the green bottle first," she instructed him as she gave the potions to Harry. "Then the first of the others half an hour after that one, and the other two at intervals of an hour each. So an hour passes between the second and the third, and an hour between the third and the fourth. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Harry said, and debated telling her that he was a well-trained Potions student and could understand simple instructions. He decided not to. It would have been satisfying, but it would also have ruined his impression as a distraught child on the edge of breaking down. He gave her a wide-eyed, worshipful look that had her patting

at her hair, looking flustered. "Thank you so much, Madam! Please, send the tally of the costs to Harry vates. What's your name?"

"Eugenia Comfrey, dear." The Healer was giving him a sort of helpless smile.

"I'm never going to forget how you helped me," Harry declared, and that was true. If she had been difficult and tried to refuse him, he would have had to fight, but as it was, he would give the potions to Hawthorn, and he would do it much more quickly than he could have otherwise. So what if Eugenia had fallen for his bait and helped him because she thought he was helpless, or because he was famous or a powerful wizard? That was exactly what Harry had wanted her to do. It was hardly her fault. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Clutching the potions close to his chest, he Levitated the Floo powder out of its dish on the mantle and made the connection spring back to life, calling on the way, "Hogwarts hospital wing!"

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Draco felt as if he were moving, or possibly living, in a dream. His father had vanished, he had destroyed a desk, and—

And that was it?

That was all?

He was the heir of the Malfoy line and the Manor was his?

Well. That last was not a question, really. Draco had reentered the study and examined the ledgers and documents Lucius had left, along with instructions on who to contact if Draco was suspicious about the provenance of any of the documents. Yes, the Manor was his. Lucius had specified that control of most of the fortune and most of the estates was to pass to Draco in the event of his "disappearance," and the conditions left for the disappearance matched the ones he'd just enacted. Draco shook his head, slightly stunned. His father had been planning this for a long, long time.

He turned and regarded Narcissa. She hadn't moved from the door to the warded room, staring fixedly at the blue and green lines of the spells, as if they represented all the secrets Lucius had kept and all the parts of his life he'd shut her out of.

"Mum?"

Narcissa stirred, turning and giving him a faint smile. The smile worried Draco. It made her look like a marble statue, and generally, when she appeared less than fully alive, there was something wrong. He went over and held her, feeling a fine tremble move through her body.

They were alone in the house—Professor Snape had gone back to Hogwarts to brew potions that Mrs. Parkinson needed—so Draco let himself lower his head to her shoulder and whisper into her ear, "It will be all right."

"It did not end as I expected," said Narcissa, so pure a time later that Draco could not have said if it was moments or minutes.

"No. Not me, either." Draco stared at the wards and the ruins of the desk, and remembered the last words Lucius had spoken to him. He wanted to believe that they were true. They probably were, or at least on the same level of truth as the information Lucius had given Harry about his parents. And yet his father had given those words to him, and the Malfoy fortune, and still fled, instead of staying to take his punishment, as recovered pureblood honor would have demanded he do.

The contradictions were greater than Draco had ever thought he would find in a man like Lucius. It showed, he supposed, that Lucius had raised him to be one way, and Draco had actually become that person, that son, never knowing that Lucius himself was satisfied with a shallower and more cracked version of the truth.

Draco had read once that the end of childhood was learning one's parents were fallible. He would have ceased to call himself a child long before that, really, but this sealed it. He felt old, immeasurably

old, staring at Lucius's faults with new eyes, forced to see him as just a person, like any other, and not a sculpture of frozen perfection.

"Are you well?" Narcissa asked him at last.

"Yes," Draco whispered, and he was. He did not regret his decision. He had simply come here expecting an end, that was all, and Lucius had assured there would not be one. Draco felt like someone who had gathered up his strength to make a leap across a ravine, only to find out that the ravine was far narrower than he'd expected, and he'd stumbled onto the grass beyond and crashed into a tree.

As if I should have expected less from Lucius, really. His game lacks all sorts of supports.

He kissed his mother on the cheek, and finally stepped away from her. The Manor was his, but he didn't have time right now to stay and make it completely his. Exhaustion and worry and uncertainty clawed at him. "Come on," he said, offering his mother his arm. "Let's return to Hogwarts."

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Harry nodded when he recognized the flutter of Hawthorn's eyes—she'd taken all four potions by then, and this was ten minutes after she took the last of the blue ones—and leaned forward. She still might be damaged; perhaps the silver poisoning had stayed too long in her body before Harry managed to get rid of it. If so, he wanted to be the first one to know. She had suffered this damage because of a man he had trusted, after all, and because Harry had not reacted fast enough when Lucius cast the multiple spells on her.

Hawthorn looked at him with recognition, but then her eyes filled with tears. "Pansy," she whispered.

It might have affected her memory. Grimly, Harry forced himself through the realization and past it. Mourning would not help Hawthorn now. Learning what she had suffered and how to help her cope with it was the most important. "Pansy's dead," he said gently, and squeezed her hand. "Do you remember?"

Hawthorn turned her head away. "Of course I remember," she said. "But Lucius showed me the memory again—so strongly that I was convinced he did it. That was why I attacked him the way I did, why he was able to cast the curse." She paused, and said, "Will there be scars?"

"It's too early to tell, but we don't think so," Harry said. "I fetched potions from St. Mungo's to cure the infection, and Professor Snape will be brewing more potions to help your recover. There will be weakness in your shoulders and arms for some time. Madam Pomfrey doesn't think it will have an effect on your magic, though."

She gave a shallow nod. Harry, thinking she had something more she wanted to say, from the trembling tension in her shoulders, waited, and wasn't surprised when she said, "I hate Lucius Malfoy."

"I know," Harry said.

"Do you?" Hawthorn turned over so suddenly that Harry was concerned for her wounds, and sure enough one on her right shoulder ripped itself open with the movement. He silently cast *Integro* at it, and it knitted. Hawthorn didn't even notice. "I don't know that you do, Harry. Have you ever felt that kind of hatred, the kind that demands vengeance? You certainly hate it enough to scold it out of all your allies wherever you find it."

"I've felt it," Harry said, remembering the summer before his third year and how part of him had hated his parents enough to set death traps for them, traps he didn't even remember setting. "But feeling it and acting on it are different things. If you'd simply believed the Unspeakables' letter, for example, and gone after Lucius without waiting for me, who knows what would have happened? He might have killed you. Even if he only cast the *Argenteus* curse, you might have died before help found you."

"I want him dead."

The passion in Hawthorn's voice was both human and lupine. Harry could understand it. It didn't mean that he thought Hawthorn was fit to get out of bed and go hunting Lucius yet.

He eased her back against the pillows, and nodded to her frustrated gaze. "Yes, Madam Pomfrey did say you'll need several days of rest."

Hawthorn closed her eyes. Harry could see the exhaustion sweeping over her like a tidal wave, but it was not enough to drown the burning hatred.

"I want him dead."

And then she was asleep. Harry contemplated her in silence for long moments, wondering what the best course for her would be.

I won't let her go hunting Lucius alone. Even if she's a stronger witch than he is a wizard, he'll have had time to prepare his ground, just the way he did at Malfoy Manor, and he can use her wolf against her, especially if she finds him near the full moon. I'll help her do what she must to earn peace. I won't stand out of the way just so that she can foolishly dash in and get herself slaughtered. Hatred is not a license to madness.

He stepped back from the bed and gave a weary stretch, extending his arms over his head to their furthest extent. He needed to rest. Then he would wake up and do what else needed to be done.

Many of those other things involved his parents.

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Much to Harry's relief, everything had come out as he intended. He'd come back to their bedroom to find Draco already deeply asleep, worn out by emotional turmoil, and so had gone to sleep himself without having to answer awkward questions. A modified version of the Tempus charm buzzed in his ear four hours later, and he rose and searched among the papers Draco had brought back. Yes, there was the book on medical magic that Lucius had said contained the possible solution to James's cancer.

Harry picked the book up and went to see Connor, using a few judicious Disillusionment Charms on the way so that he wouldn't have to stop and explain his presence to anyone. Merlin knew what rumors might coat the school already, given Hawthorn's presence in the hospital wing and the fact that Snape hadn't been there to teach his morning classes.

He reached Gryffindor Tower—since it was after dinner, Connor should be there—and gave the latest password. The Fat Lady admitted him without a murmur. Harry glanced quickly around the common room, and found curious stares coming to rest on them, but he moved too fast for anyone to stand and ask questions; in moments he was already ascending to the sixth-year boys' room.

Connor sprawled on his bed, restlessly flipping through his Charms textbook and muttering under his breath. When he strained his ears, Harry could just make out, "Stupid damn Snake-Calling Charm. Why shouldn't it use the same basic structure as the Bird-Calling one?"

"Mastering one struggle only to become involved in another?" Harry asked, as he shut the door behind him. "The story of your life, brother."

"Harry!"

He found himself bowled back against the door by his brother's rush and hug. Cautiously, Harry patted Connor's back with one hand, then pushed him away a bit so that he could breathe without the book being crushed against his chest. "What was that for?"

"No one knew where you were!" Connor answered, with a glare. "I did go to Slytherin after lunch, but one idiot wouldn't let me in, and another idiot said that you were resting and I shouldn't disturb you." He eyed Harry doubtfully. "Is that true? Did you actually rest, and would I actually have disturbed you if I'd come in to see you just then?"

"Yes," said Harry, deciding unadorned truth worked best.

Connor looked taken aback. "Oh," he murmured. Then he rallied. "Well! It was still rude. And I'm glad to see that you've learned sense at last, and you'll sleep after a difficult time. What happened?"

Harry gave him as much of the truth as he thought wouldn't betray others' secrets, short of the information about their parents, which he wanted to save until last. He didn't tell Connor Lucius's words to Draco, even though he'd heard them well enough, or exactly how badly Hawthorn had been hurt. Those were their weaknesses, possible chinks in their armor, to share or not as they willed.

Connor grew paler and paler as he listened, and leaned forward and gave Harry several little hugs along the way. "I'm glad that you had them with you," he whispered into Harry's ear, when the story finished. "I'm glad that you weren't killed."

"So am I." Harry patted his shoulder absently, then freed himself and held up the book again. "Lucius gave me details of how he tortured our parents, Connor. He took Veritaserum just before he did, so I know that what he said was true. He gave James a kind of cancer with magical insects, and the answer to how to cure it should be in this book. And he set a spell on Lily that would stretch the last moment of her life into a painful eternity, and he told me how to cure that, too. But I'll need your help. Moral support, if nothing else." He tried a smile, but he knew it was limp and unconvincing, and a moment later he knew he shouldn't have tried it.

Connor, being Connor-who-noticed-inconvenient-things the way he was lately, latched on to the one thing Harry hadn't wanted him to latch on to. "How are you going to be able to cure Lily?"

Harry met his eyes calmly. "The absorbere gift."

"No." Connor's face was the color of strawberries.

"Yes."

"No." Connor leaned forward and closed his hands like hooks on Harry's shoulders. They hurt. "Haven't you done enough to help them? The little speech at the trial was more than enough. I don't

want you seeing them again, Harry. I'm sure that Snape would agree."

Harry shrugged, forcing his brother's hands away. "I might not need to be there when they cure James—"

"You won't be," said Connor. "I can go in and stand with him and do whatever else is necessary for that."

"But I don't think there's any other way to remove the curse from Lily," Harry continued. "I recognize what Lucius described. It was created by a sacrifice. There's no countercurse for it, and no healing spell. I can remove the magic by draining it. That's what I'll have to do."

He felt calm, empty, very drained himself. He'd thought when Mallory spoke to him that he could not hate her for torturing his parents because it all seemed so long ago. So it was with Lucius; the pain Harry felt on Draco's behalf and for the betrayal Lucius had given Hawthorn was much worse than what he felt when he contemplated the torture of his parents. And they could be healed. That meant he could give them something that would ease their pain, just as he'd done with other people. They should be nothing more than those other people to him, random strangers he could help, if they were really in his past. He had cut them out of his life. Releasing them back into it would do no harm, because they had no fertile ground to root in.

"Let the Healers and the Ministry officials look at Lily first," Connor said, and Harry was startled to see that he was pleading more than arguing. "There might be another way to take the curse from her. Just—please, Harry. Let them do that."

"They can do that," Harry agreed. "But if there's no other way to step around this, then I'll see her, and do what I need to do to take away the curse. No one deserves to suffer that much pain as they die, Connor."

"You really have no desire for vengeance, do you?" Connor muttered.

Harry gave him an empty gaze. "I've cut it out of me in regards to them," he answered. "They need my help, so I'm going to help them."

He would do this because it needed to be done, he told himself. The past was the past, and might remain that way. This was for their futures.

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Rufus sat slowly back behind his desk. His whole head ached, but he had to acknowledge that came from tension, and it wasn't going to be soothed by his usual cup of tea, or Percy offering to do some of the paperwork.

The Healers had had the Potters for the past week. They had finally confirmed that, yes, they could do something about the cancer that James Potter had burgeoning inside him—though it would require blood from a family member. Connor Potter, Harry's younger brother, had offered his blood for that.

But the curse on Lily Potter was a strong Dark one, one that not even the man who had cast it on her, Lucius Malfoy, could entirely remove. It had to be stripped or drained by something that would absorb magic. And if such an artifact lingered in the vaults of the Department of Mysteries, Rufus didn't know about it. He'd asked for an official list of such artifacts from the Unspeakables. Of course, there was nothing like that on there.

Even if the Stone isn't playing with Harry, it won't want to make this easy for him. It probably wants to see what he'll do, when he has to face his mother again.

Rufus had his own speculations about the Stone's motives, of course. It seemed strange that it had worked so specifically to insure Lucius's downfall, rather than simply insuring that Harry knew about his betrayal. Why a letter sent directly to Hawthorn Parkinson, rather than solely the communication of Fiona Mallory to Harry? She might have gone ahead and killed Lucius on her own.

The Stone might not have minded that. But surely it wasn't as good as seeing Harry upset? Harry had told him after the Unspeakables' capture of Adalrico Bulstrode that the Stone seemed interested in him

as a figure of magic it had never encountered before, and it would probably conduct experiments on him. Altering his moods could count as one of those.

Rufus had listened to Harry often in the past week, as they discussed his parents and the Stone's motives. And all the while, words he couldn't speak had been burning behind his tongue.

It may have targeted Lucius because he took part in the Ritual of Cinnabrum.

The Stone hadn't been able to see what happened in Courtroom Ten, but it could have looked through the records of the wards and seen those seventeen people approaching the bottom level of the Ministry. Or it could have sensed the shimmer of the Unbreakable Vows around them, perhaps.

Plotting against it would be enough to annoy the Stone. It had shone itself willing to go after Harry for considerably lesser reason.

And that meant it might seek to hurt the others who had been there. Percy. Aurelius Flint. Griselda Marchbanks.

Rufus himself.

And still he could not speak, not breathe a hint of the truth, the bridle around his neck holding his mouth shut.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, counting down the moments before he would have to firecall Hogwarts and tell Harry that his magic was needed to heal his mother.

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"Yes."

"No."

"There's no other way."

“That doesn’t mean you can’t leave her to suffer.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. Snape had grown to hate the gesture in the last week. It usually meant he was puzzled by Snape’s lack of logic, and was about to show why, in fact, things could be the way that he thought they could. “But I can’t,” he said. “She’s nothing to me now, just a fragment of my past, just someone I’ve done with. I have to approach her, but she’s a stranger. I should be able to help her like any other stranger and then leave her alone again.”

“Do you really think that will happen?” Snape lowered his voice a notch and took a step forward. “That you’ll be able to stand before her without your emotions creeping upon you and overwhelming you?”

Unexpectedly, Harry grinned. It was the first smile Snape had seen him give in a week, and he did not like it. It had too much of the maniac in it, a glint that he usually only associated with Evan Rosier.

“I do think that, yes,” he said, far too cheerfully. “I’ve been able to do what I need to do in the past week, Severus, and balance the life I’m leading right now with what other people require from me. I’ve been eating and sleeping on time, haven’t I? I haven’t ignored my classwork. I’ve come and told you when I had trouble sleeping, and taken a Dreamless Sleep Potion for it. And at the same time, I’ve helped comfort Draco and Hawthorn, and Narcissa when she needed it, and helped prepare my brother to see our dad again. I think I’ve done pretty well, considering how badly Lucius’s betrayal might have thrown off my center of balance.”

“That is not what I mean,” said Snape.

“Then what do you mean, sir?” Harry took a coaxing step forward. “I can’t understand it unless you explain it to me.”

And there they met an impasse, because Snape could not explain it, except with words that sounded far too wet to him. He wanted Harry to—to live, was the way he would phrase it, but Harry had been living. He had not allowed Lucius’s betrayal, nor the looming specter of the idea that he would have to heal Lily Potter, to delay him for very long. He had worked his way forward, and identified dangerous signs of

obsession in himself, and dealt with them. He had even, as far as Snape could tell, continued to research ways of dealing with the Horcruxes and freeing the thestrals. He hadn't broken down or flung himself too madly into one thing, his major coping mechanisms in the past. It was no wonder that Harry felt rather as though those fussing over him were fussing over nothing.

But something was still missing, and Snape could not say what it was. Or he could say, and in the words he would expose far more sentiment than he was comfortable speaking of.

"You know, sir," said Harry, evidently feeling that with the moment past, he had decided not to speak at all, "if you need help of me, you have only to ask." He reached up, squeezed Snape's arm comfortingly, and then made for the door.

Snape found his tongue again. "Harry, you will not go and heal Lily Potter."

Harry paused, but didn't look back at him. "And how are you going to stop me?"

That isn't a question I remember him asking before. But Snape held calm even in the face of such provocation. "I am your legal guardian," he said. "If I say that you cannot go to her, then you cannot, Harry."

Harry sighed and turned to face him. "You can't stop me that way, sir—"

"Severus."

"I don't feel like calling you that now. You don't have a right to command me." Harry cocked his head contemplatively. "I was wrong about the thestrals. I made a mistake there. But here, I've waited a week. There's no other way they can heal her. If I leave her like this, I have the punishment of knowing that when she dies, she'll do it in pain and suffering I could have prevented. I've thought about things the way an adult would, and tried contingency plans, and they didn't work. You have no right to forbid me, sir."

Those words were delivered in a tone that actually seemed lower than Harry's normal voice, and some of the stones around Snape turned white-blue with frost. He was forced to incline his head stiffly, never taking his eyes off Harry.

"When you feel like talking about this, then come back here and we will do so," he said.

Harry relaxed then, and the frost vanished. "I probably won't, sir," he said. "I want to help her and have it over and done with, and then put the emotions out of my mind. But thank you for the offer. I'll remember it."

He left then, and five minutes later, Snape thought of the perfect thing he should have said to him.

Harry was Occluding furiously to be able to get through this without collapsing. Normally, given everything he had to do, Snape would have approved that. It was certainly better than wallowing in the grief and guilt as had happened when he killed the dozen children in the Life-Web.

But Occlusion meant that Harry hadn't yet faced his emotions. If his life was really so integrated and whole as he liked to pretend, then he should have felt free to do that and still do everything else at the same time.

And there Snape ran up against a wall of hypocrisy, because he hardly did that, did he? The only usual activities in his days were eating, sleeping, brewing potions, teaching, and marking, and the most usual emotions he felt while doing it were anger and bitterness.

I hope someone else tells him that, he thought, rubbing his left arm; it had been tingling rather fiercely since he woke up this morning. Since he will never accept it coming from me.

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"This may hurt," the Healer told Connor.

Connor knew what that meant. Things that hurt a little in the eyes of Healers and parents hurt a lot in the eyes of children. So he braced himself for intense pain, the way he had when Peter trained him last summer, and was surprised when the only pain he felt was his arm contracting sharply as the Healer drew blood out of it. The liquid flowed through the air in patterns that followed her wand, and Connor, fascinated in spite of himself, watched it intently as she directed it gently into a vial that lay close at hand. Then she whispered “Integro,” at his arm, and the small wound that had opened closed in a moment.

“That’s all the blood you need from me?” Connor cocked his head to watch the vial. It had seemed immense when the Healer first showed it to him, but now he could hardly believe that this small pool of red liquid would be enough to save James from cancer.

“We can amplify it and insure that it replicates itself when we put it in the body.” The Healer smiled at him. She was a short woman, with dark hair that reminded Connor of his own, and pale blue eyes that made her expression a bit watery but still kind. A round badge above her heart said that her name was Betsy—something; Connor couldn’t read the surname. “So, no, we don’t need much. Just the way that you only need two mice to have a whole colony of mice soon.”

“If the mice are male and female,” Connor pointed out.

Betsy laughed. “Well, yes, that’s right.” She looked up as the door of the small, enclosed white room where they’d sat, with only a portrait of a stuffy-looking old wizard for company, swung open. “And here’s your father.”

Connor stiffened, but didn’t bother pointing out that he called his father “James,” and that only. He’d heard Harry referring to him as “Dad” a few times in the past week, but Harry had denied that it meant anything when Connor questioned him. And when Connor had tried to raise other objections against Harry attending Lily, Harry had looked at him patiently, and Connor knew he’d lost the argument.

Two Healers and two Aurors accompanied James into the room. Connor didn’t know why they needed so many guards; James had

been stripped of his magic, so he was hardly about to grab a wand away from someone and threaten them all.

And he looked so pathetic, coming along between the Aurors, his head bowed as if he hoped that he would be relieved of the weight of holding it up soon. He was much thinner than Connor remembered, and his skin had the ghostly pale look that Connor's got the time he was so sick as a child that he had to stay inside for a month, only worse. His hair was thick with grease and sweat.

"I did ask for him to be clean," said Betsy, sounding a little irritated. She waved her wand, and James's hair was clean, as were his arms.

He looked up then, and froze when he met Connor's gaze. Connor returned the stare as evenly as he could. He supposed the Healers hadn't told James whom he was coming to meet.

"Son?" James whispered.

"Connor," Connor said stubbornly, and folded his arms over his chest.

One of the other Healers looked as if he'd like to ask questions, but Betsy quelled him with a glance. "Into this chair, Mr. Potter," she said, and slapped the plain wooden seat in front of her.

The Aurors had to steer James there, in the end; he wouldn't stop staring at Connor. Connor just kept staring back. He felt a hard-edged pity, and a certain satisfaction. James was paying for being a coward and a hypocrite and someone who refused to see that his sons were being abused even when he knew about it. Connor supposed he couldn't ask for much more than that.

Betsy pushed James down, and then picked up the vial with Connor's blood in it. With a wave of her wand, she cut a small gash on James's arm—he flinched—and then pressed the vial against it, and chanted a low incantation. Connor craned his neck, but couldn't see the blood flowing into the wound, just that one moment the vial's glass glinted red and the next that it didn't.

Betsy healed the wound, and then began chanting again, this time quite a long spell. Connor couldn't keep up with the Latin, so he didn't try. He noticed the Aurors talking quietly. Betsy had closed her eyes and retired so entirely within the cocoon of the spell that Connor knew she didn't notice.

James seemed to have seen the same thing.

"What is your life like now, Connor?" he asked.

Connor thought about lying, to try and punish him, but he didn't think he knew James well enough to say what would punish him. He might have changed again in the year and a half he'd been in Tullianum, though his cringing suggested that wasn't true. So Connor said, "Quiet. Voldemort hasn't attacked since last Midsummer."

"And that was Harry's doing?"

"Yeah." Connor couldn't resist a dig, then. "He cut a hole in his magical core and drove him from the battlefield. Quite the heroic son you raised, even though you didn't have much part in raising him."

James shuddered and put the hand of the arm Betsy hadn't gashed over his eyes. "Don't, Connor," he whispered. "You don't know what life has been like for me. My magic gone, and then my mind invaded by the visions of Dumbledore's Capto Horrifer spell, and then days and weeks and months when I had nothing to do but stare at the walls of my cell and think."

Connor smiled. "Well. With that much time, perhaps you've even come up with an original thought."

"Why do you have to be cruel?" James whispered, though there was no spirit behind it.

"Because you couldn't restrain yourself in your cruelty," said Connor, his exasperation bubbling over. "Maybe, if you'd shown one sign of remorse for the way you behaved towards Harry, just one, then I wouldn't feel like I had to hit you when you're lying wounded on the

ground. Instead, I testified against you, and then I watched as you went to have your magic stripped, and I've never regretted it."

James looked at him at last. "I've raised one hero and one proud and thoughtless and cruel young man, according to you."

Connor rolled his eyes. "Don't flatter yourself. We both know that you had less to do with our rearing than Lily did."

"But don't you ever regret your childhood, and the way it ended?" James shifted forward as much as he could, sounding earnest. "Don't you ever wish it could have stayed the same, golden and untainted? Wasn't I ever—" He paused, swallowed, then continued. "I'm always 'James' in your memories? Never 'Dad?'"

Connor saw what he wanted, then. James had lost all sense of the person he'd once been in Tullianum; he had too much evidence that he was a coward, a broken man, a neglectful father, not the hero he'd once wanted to be. If someone outside the prison still remembered him as a hero, then maybe he could preserve some shreds of dignity when he went back into the cells.

Bigger off, gift for noticing, Connor thought, and hoped fervently it would listen to him this time.

He now had a choice between telling a palatable lie that might ease James's pain a little, or going with a truth that would be honest but work as a torture. No, he didn't think back on his father as a father. He'd worked hard to wipe out all trace of the emotion with which he'd once regarded James, the same way he'd worked hard to remove all traces of jealousy of Harry from his own psyche. Harry didn't need a jealous brother. Connor didn't need a broken father hanging around his neck. And he didn't regard the days of his childhood as idyllic, either. How could he? He had to search every memory now for the hidden signs of abuse, for the truth that he knew was there even if he couldn't see it—especially if he couldn't see it.

Connor's hands clenched on his arms. A year ago, he would have told the truth without hesitation, but a year ago, his anger had still been hot and burning.

His conscience spoke in Hermione's voice, and told him that a lie wasn't the same thing as resuming a relationship with James.

Connor sighed, and spoke. "Sometimes I have good memories of childhood, yeah," he said, and James's face lit up like the sky with fireworks after Voldemort had been reported dead the first time.

"And me?" he asked eagerly. "What do you call me, in your head?"

There was only so far a lie could take him, though.

"James," Connor told him.

He might have said something else, but abruptly Betsy's still continuing Latin chant rose to a climax, and Connor saw her magic roar through James and sweep out again like a tornado. It came through the gash on James's arm for a road. It was a golden tornado, and it held the broken, black bodies of insects in itself. Connor curled his lip. That was a dirty thing Lucius did. And coming here to offer my blood and give James a chance to live was the right thing to do.

He should stare at his cell walls for many more years before he dies.

Betsy waved her wand a few more times, then nodded briskly to the Aurors. "We're done. You can take him back to the Ministry now."

James tried to struggle as they lifted him, but one of them muttered an efficient Stunning Curse, and he collapsed. Connor was glad. He didn't want to know what the man who was once his father would have said.

Liar, whispered his conscience.

But Connor had done enough of what it wanted for one day, so he ignored it.

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Harry had a new tactic for facing his mother. He had sunk his emotions to the bottom of the Occlumency pools, then muffled the pools in dense fog, then draped soft cloth over that, until the only feeling left near the surface of his mind was a kind of vague compassion. He would have stopped to help a dog dying in the street with that kind of emotion. He was ready when the Aurors opened the door and ushered him in to face Lily.

Snape had offered to come with him. Draco had demanded to come with him. Harry had refused both. He would have Aurors for companionship and protection, in case Lily tried something desperate, and he doubted that either Snape or Draco would be able to control the impulse to snap at his mother, which would only distress her further.

Draco had had a long, raging argument with him. Well. A one-sided, long, raging argument. Harry had sat there and calmly stared at him. Then Draco had stormed out, and come back later with his face tear-stained and lain down stiffly to go to sleep with his back to Harry. Harry had talked to him calmly enough the next morning about Lucius, and the difficulties his going away like that had left Draco in.

There were burdens that were other people's to carry, and some burdens that Harry could help support. And then there were tasks that he had to perform on his own.

The cell was utterly plain and bare. There was a bed, and a toilet, and a table that Harry knew held the trays of food the Aurors brought Lily. And there was nothing else. No books, no Daily Prophet, no portraits. The prisoners were expected to lie on their backs and stare at the ceiling until they went mad, apparently.

"Here she is," said the male Auror who'd come with him, quite unnecessarily, in Harry's opinion. And then they shut the door and stood in front of it, and left Harry there with his mother.

She'd changed, of course, growing paler, but not much thinner. Her green eyes held a dull gloss to them. When she sat up and stared at him, Harry wasn't sure if she really saw him. The Aurors had told him as they descended into Tullianum that his mother had suffered from

Dumbledore's Capto Horrifer. The Healers had worked with her for months before they'd been satisfied that she was sane enough to endure moments alone without babbling at herself and tearing at her skin.

She whispered, "Harry."

Well. This is progress. She hadn't tried to run screaming from the room yet, which Harry had thought she might do, given how afraid of his magic she had once been. He nodded. "Lily," he said. "I came to heal you. The Healers talked to you about that, didn't they? About the curse Lucius cast on you?"

She nodded rapidly, too long, and then stopped herself with an equally senseless, abrupt jerk. Her eyes wouldn't stop traveling over him. "And you're going to heal me," she whispered. "And you're not a Dark Lord."

"No, I'm not." Harry had known she might want to talk about personal things. He had decided to keep his answers as short and soothing and noncommittal as possible. He squinted, and a dark crust of magic slowly formed around her. "Can you move towards the head of the bed, please?" he asked, gesturing with one hand. "That way, I can see how the magic winds around you more easily."

Lily scrambled across the bed, still staring at him. "And you have a second hand now," she said.

"Yes," said Harry, and resisted the temptation to say that Death had given it to him. He was not going to speak about anything personal with her. Why should he? He would hardly tell someone else who commented on his hand, someone who didn't know him, the truth, and that was the position where Lily stood in relation to him now. He studied the dark crust of magic again, and then nodded. If she were still a witch, this would have been difficult, but there was no magic anywhere on his mother except for that one edging. Harry didn't have to untangle it from under any other power. He just had to swallow it.

"You've become a new person," Lily whispered. "Does that mean that you have changed in regards to me?"

Harry could feel the Aurors stirring uneasily. They were supposed to protect him if Lily made a physical attack, but he thought Scrimgeour had also told them to beware a mental assault. Once again, he was grateful that Snape and Draco weren't here. They would already be trying to drag him out of the room.

"No," he said, and opened his gullet.

The moment he did, Lily screamed, and cowered back against the pillows, wrapping her arms around her head.

Harry sighed and glanced at the Aurors. "What do you think I should do?" he asked, carefully closing the absorbere gift. "She appears to be terrified of my swallowing magic even though she has none to lose any more."

"We can hold her flat," offered the bulky female Auror, whom Harry thought looked like Millicent's third cousin. She eyed Lily as if she would enjoy gripping her wrists and holding them above her head.

"Not that, if possible." Harry shook his head a little. "Perhaps I can persuade her." He faced Lily again. She had pulled her arms down and was regarding him over one of them. "I'm not going to drain your magic," he said, making his voice as soothing as he could. "You're not a witch. You can't lose it to me. I'm only going to try and pull out a curse that would cause you pain in the future."

"I—I might let you do that." Lily gave another shy rabbit-nod. "If—"
"And she broke off and bit her lip."

"Yes?" Harry leaned forward encouragingly. "What is the matter? What would you like?"

"For you to talk to me while you do it," Lily said.

Harry swallowed a curse and stuffed the anger back into the Occlumency pool. Fuck. Well. He had the feeling Lily knew exactly what she was doing. He had disappointed her by refusing to engage

with her on a personal level, so she would ask for that as a price for good behavior.

Harry shrugged, and told himself he was empty of feelings for Lily. He would talk to her, if that was really what she wanted. She had not asked anything terrible so far.

“Lie still,” he said, and once again, fixed his attention on the dark crust. Lily still jerked, though this time it was before he opened the absorbere magic. Harry thought she couldn’t feel it; she was probably judging when he opened it by how intent his expression had grown.

She asked, “Where is Voldemort now?”

“Wounded,” Harry murmured. He pulled, and the first part of the curse flaked loose and flew towards him. He grimaced. It tasted even fouler than some of the Death Eater magic he’d eaten almost a year ago. “I cut a hole in his magical core last year. He’s hiding somewhere, and he hasn’t dared a strong strike in nearly a year. All his Death Eaters are dead except the ones who became my allies, and Indigena Yaxley and Evan Rosier.”

Silence, and he had the feeling she was staring at him in shock. But he refused to look at her face and confirm that.

“I never knew—” Lily whispered. Then she cleared her throat, and said, “Did Connor help you?”

“Yes.” Harry cracked the crust in a weak place, and grunted in satisfaction as the larger piece tore loose and soared down his throat.

“How did he help you?”

“By using his compulsion on a group of Death Eaters bringing in a tank of sirens. They would have compelled most of the people in Hogwarts otherwise, and Merlin knows what Voldemort might have made the hostages do.” Harry squinted, and finally picked the second loose piece of the curse off. This bit tried to escape him, as if the Dark magic knew what he was doing and didn’t like being swallowed, but he snatched it and dissolved it. His own boundaries expanded a

little. This was an unexpectedly heavy meal, but Harry rejected the idea of closing the absorbere gift now and letting it digest this. He didn't want to spend that long in the cell with Lily because—

Well, just because, that was all.

"I want to know more," Lily coaxed. "Are you any closer to fulfilling the prophecy? Have you used the training I gave you to help you do it? Have you thought about whether we were right, after all, to train you the way we did?"

"No, yes, and I don't know if you were right or not." The rest of the curse, unfortunately, showed no sign of weakening just because Harry had found weak points in the other pieces. Calling on it was like stepping on a thick cake of ice. He had to stamp several times before cracks raced through it, and it seemed as if he might be able to follow the cracks to the center and pull the shards off completely.

"Harry. Look at me."

Sighing, Harry met her eyes.

To his dim surprise, hers were large and glistening with tears. "I did love you," Lily whispered. "When nothing changed, when even after that horrible vision you didn't come and kill me—and then I found out Albus had sent the vision—" She caught her breath with a sob. "I've had a lot of time to think, Harry. I think that, perhaps, I didn't express my love for you in the right way. But I didn't know that for certain. Perhaps the good we did you outweighed the evil. I didn't know it, because you wouldn't come and talk to me."

Harry frowned slightly in exasperation. She had a right to ask healing from him, even comfort if she was so afraid of his absorbere gift. She didn't have a right to ask for anything else.

He tore through the rest of the curse, sending his magic running through the cracks in the black crust. It responded, flickering and rippling up and down, and then came loose. Indigo flakes raced towards Harry, who caught them by stretching the "mouth" of his gift

as wide as he could. He swallowed the putrid mess, trying not to grimace.

“Harry,” Lily whispered.

He was occupied in settling the newly absorbed magic in his gut, and didn’t respond.

“I wish things had been different,” Lily said, her voice thin and reedy. “I wish I had been able to express my love in a way that would have helped you with future battles and kept you strong. I wish I had known what the prophecy really proclaimed, that you were the Boy-Who-Lived. I wish I hadn’t needed to lie to Connor. I wish Albus had been a different sort of man. I wish I hadn’t lied to James, either. I think I even regret that the training I gave you was—well, it could be called abuse.” She leaned forward. “But to know that, I need to know how much it’s helped you and how much it’s hindered you. Will you come back and talk to me again, Harry? Will you tell me that?”

Harry hesitated. Has she changed? It sounded as if she’d reconsidered some of her thoughts, at least, some of the bone-deep beliefs she’d always taken for granted. And she was asking for a relationship with him, a new kind of foundation reared on burned and salted ground—

And what if I don’t want to make the effort to build one?

Harry stopped in his effort to take a step towards her. His heart beat loudly in his ears, and a rent in one of his Occlumency pools had sent a few emotions bubbling towards the surface.

I don’t want this. I don’t give a fuck if she’s changed. It’s too late. I just want to go on and live my life, my life where she’s a stranger to me, and has no part in my standing or falling.

He tied up the emotions then, before they could get out of hand, and made a cold little bow to Lily. Then he turned for the door.

“Harry?” He heard the sheets rasp under her fingers as she scrambled to the edge of the bed. “Harry! Please, just tell me, the

answer to that one question. Has it helped or hindered you more? Do I have to call it abuse?"

Oh, how part of him longed to turn and shout at her, screaming that of course it had been abuse, that she was blind to imagine otherwise, that once again she was stumbling along in a labyrinth looking for ways to excuse the unforgivable—

But if he screamed that, that would just prove he hadn't succeeded in exiling her from his heart after all, and that he should have brought Draco and Snape with him today. And that wasn't true.

So he walked out with the Aurors, and shut the door on her cries, and accompanied them up the main corridor of Tullianum, past other shut cells of criminals who might be worth a second chance, and might not be.

Maybe he could have something different with her, if he chose to build it. Perhaps they could have a reconciliation, a renewal.

But Harry knew already that ninety percent of the burden would fall on him, and that it would interfere with other relationships in his life which were finally the way he had wanted them.

So he walked out of Tullianum, and left her there.

Chapter Eighty-Seven: Hawthorn, Dragonsbane, and Pansies

Rufus ran a hand through his hair in frustration. Then he tried to smooth it back into place, because it already looked enough like a lion's mane as it was, and he'd slept on it, so that it stood out around his head. He hadn't had time to use hair-straightening charms between the moment that Hope had awakened him with the news and the moment he came through the Floo into the office.

I don't remember May as a month of escalating crises, he thought, and had to stifle a yawn. On the other hand, I've only been Minister for three Mays. Perhaps the months take turns.

He sat up then, and took a deep breath. He couldn't afford to wander in mind. He had to be clear and focused to take this problem seriously.

The clipping was an article from the Daily Prophet—an article that the Prophet hadn't published. Apparently their reporter, a keen young Muggleborn witch with ambitions to become the next Rita Skeeter, had uncovered far different things than they thought she would, and so they'd sent the article on to the Ministry when she finished writing it.

WEREWOLF COMMUNITIES 'LETTING THE DAYLIGHT IN'

Muggle awareness is 'the pack of the future'

By: Irene Fairchild

Fairchild had been assigned to create a report about werewolf packs in London and how well they fit into the wizarding world, as far as Rufus could tell. The Prophet had evidently expected a story with some negative anecdotes, some positive ones, and little danger, since they'd assigned Fairchild to write it well before the full moon.

Instead, what she'd uncovered was that werewolf packs in London were making contact with Muggles—especially the Muggle family of their bitten members, and especially adolescents who seemed determined to follow any hint of magic or wonder into dark corners.

From what Fairchild said, a few packs, led by alphas who “called themselves after birds,” had even accepted Muggles, biting those who asked.

Rufus did not personally know anyone mad enough to ask for the curse of lycanthropy. He was glad of it.

And the Muggles crossing into the wizarding world...he felt half-helpless in his quest to understand them. Surely most of them were frightened of magic? He only had to read history to understand that, and he had, including the pieces they wouldn't teach in Hogwarts because they didn't want to scar fragile young minds. When had Muggle teenagers decided that they wanted to know the wizarding world, that they would rather run on four legs and watch people wave wands than watch the telly, or, well, do the other things that Muggles did?

Rufus's headache grew worse when he thought about the international scope of the problem. The other Ministers would be contacting him soon, politely asking why Britain seemed to have a problem keeping the International Statute of Secrecy intact yet again. Harry fighting a dragon above London, two siren attacks up the Thames in little more than a year, and now werewolves. And those were just the greatest violations. There had always been the minor ones, like a wizard losing his temper and casting a hex on a Muggle, or children carelessly riding brooms out of bounds. The Obliviators were always busy.

And the werewolves! They knew the rules of the wizarding world even if their new Muggle friends didn't. Why were they doing this?

That, actually, Rufus thought he could answer, and wished he couldn't. The werewolves had been ignored and stigmatized and pushed at and hunted for so long that most of them had formed into a cohesive community, satisfying both human and lupine social needs, and come to consider themselves as apart from wizarding society. Individuals could be attracted by the promise of power or rights into behaving as the Ministry wished, but the packs were much harder to court. Now they did have those rights, at least in law, but individuals were still maltreated, refused Wolfsbane, sneered at, and sacked

without warning. And so the packs, with knowledge of the victory that could be won now, if they fought hard enough, and the hypocrisy breathed in their faces at every moment, and that old conviction that they weren't really wizards if wizards didn't acknowledge them, would not see much wrong in turning to Muggles. Being persecuted was nothing new to them.

Rufus could understand it. But the idea of it still maddened him.

So there was an international incident carefully deposited in the middle of his desk.

While he sat there contemplating it gloomily, an owl soared through the window. Rufus took the letter from it, wondering. He thought he had seen the owl before, but he received so much post that he could not remember where. At least he knew the owl and the letter it carried were not a threat; there were wards around the Ministry now that examined all birds for dangerous charms and curses.

He opened the letter, and realized it was a response to his request for information from Ignifer Apollonis. If the Liberator was a daughter of Cupressus Apollonis, as Rufus suspected, he wanted to know the plan of the old bastard's house and something about the traps he might have waiting before he entered.

The letter was disappointing, though.

May 16th, 1997

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I regret to say that there is little I can help you with. I have not been home except for short visits in fifteen years, and then I was restricted to one of two rooms: the entrance hall or the room where Cupressus habitually receives guests. I agree that the clues the Liberator gives sound like my family, and I do have a younger sister, named Candor, but I do not believe that Cupressus treats her so badly. He focused most of his attention on me. Candor was born five years before I left the family, which would make her young, like your Liberator. But I do

not know her, as a person. I have no idea what the day-to-day life in that household is like, and I wish to never know again.

Regarding your other questions, it is true that Cupressus had dealings with the Unspeakables. I believe that they tried to blackmail him, and he resisted. But, once again, I cannot prove this for certain, and I would not trust memories fifteen years old when one is making a raid. I am sorry that I cannot be of more help.

Yours under the Dark,

Ignifer Pemberley.

Rufus folded the letter with sharp, angry movements, and made a mental note to tell Hope that the raid would have to wait until they knew there was some reason worth approaching the Apollonis house for.

In the meantime, the werewolf problem waited to be solved.

And Elder Juniper, who was gaining more and more prominence in the Wizengamot of late, hated werewolves.

Rufus wondered which Fate had been assigned to make his life more difficult, and why it had chosen May as the month to do so.

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Harry eased gently off the bed. He'd just given Draco a thorough massage—that was much easier to do, now that he had two hands—and left him snoring. Draco had appeared in their bedroom with a headache caused by sorting through the documents Lucius had left for him. Harry trusted that he'd managed to soothe it well enough. Draco didn't even move as he walked towards the door, and Harry shut the door softly so that the noises of the common room wouldn't intrude.

He stood on the other side of the door a moment, considering. It was a Saturday, and no one expected him for classes. It was also a few days since he had healed Lily and Connor had gone to give his blood

to James, and both Snape and Draco were slowly calming down and had stopped giving him the looks that meant they expected him to explode at any moment. Harry had tolerated them while they lasted, but they put him on edge.

He knew whom he should go and see. Hawthorn had returned to the Garden a few days ago. But Madam Pomfrey had tried to persuade her to stay longer. When Harry asked her why, the matron admitted that she didn't think Hawthorn was mentally recovered, whatever physical recovery she'd accomplished. Only one of the wounds had scarred after all, one high on her left shoulder that she could cover with the sleeve of her robe. But Hawthorn had still been in a black fury when she departed, helped along, Harry thought, by the werewolf temper Remus had once described to him.

He nodded. He would go and see her, and hope a few days back in her home had done her good. If they had not, well—

He would not see another of his allies lost to the desire for vengeance. He would not. It had caused too much trouble already. Deaths, and torture, and the tying-up of various of his allies in other things; Tybalt Starrise was still sorting out the legal and social problems his brother Pharos had caused, and trying to decide how much support he should give him in the courtroom and whether he should argue for Tullianum or restriction in St. Mungo's.

The stronger the Alliance of Sun and Shadow got, Harry thought as he started towards Snape's office to inform him of where he was going, the more careful he had to be about this, not less. More and more people watched them. More and more people stood a chance of being affected when Harry or one of his allies did something questionable, and more and more people stood a chance of being those who brought the questions. Harry stood in the center of his own web of influence, and connected to many others. Pluck one strand of a web, and the others vibrated.

He would not try to persuade Hawthorn out of her hatred. He would not try to make it seem as if her losses did not matter. But he would ask questions about her desire for vengeance, and hope that the answers would reveal how very little that desire mattered, against the

real scope of things. And he would offer his presence as a silent support.

If Hawthorn would not talk to him, then Harry would simply wait outside the Garden for however long he needed to.

SSSSSSSSSSSSSS

Hawthorn dropped the vial, and it cracked open on the stone floor of her Potions lab. The silver liquid, the result of a good six hours' work on the lycanthropy cure, splattered all over the floor and walls.

She half-shrieked, which came out of her mouth as a howl. Then she sagged back against the wall, her breath slow and steady.

I can't do this.

She couldn't do this. She was trying to forget her desire to hunt down and kill Lucius Malfoy—who had left behind no traces, anyway, and nothing that could be used to track him—by working on something productive, something that would change her status back to a pureblood witch's, and relieve her of the major weakness that Lucius had turned against her in the first place. Once, forgetting such inconvenient, inappropriate emotions would have been a matter as simple as snapping her fingers. Once, she was a self-possessed, self-controlled pureblood, a player of the game.

And now she was a hunter who wanted blood.

The wards twanged, informing her that someone had appeared on the edge of the estate. Hawthorn snatched her wand, secretly glad, secretly hoping it was Evan Rosier. She would fight and destroy him without a qualm. And the hatred would be less overwhelming when she was done, calmer and quieter.

But she froze when she stepped out the front door and saw the figure walking calmly towards her across her neatly tended lawn, already thick with young grass and the shoots of flowers. It was Harry.

No. I don't want him to see me like this.

She retreated inside, and shut the door. She listened to Harry's footsteps come closer and closer until he rapped on the door, instinctively avoiding the parts of the wood that hid traps and wards, and closed her eyes, feeling sick. Why she hadn't told him to go away yet was beyond her.

Of course, part of me is weak. I do want his attention. If I could control my voice when I asked for it, and prevent him from seeing the tears, I might even invite him to come in.

"Hawthorn?" Harry asked, the way he never used to do. He had always called her "Mrs. Parkinson" until very recently. Hawthorn thought she might prefer it now. The formality would have the bracing effect of a chill wind, forcing her to stifle her emotional chaos and act like an adult. "I'm here to speak with you about Lucius Malfoy. May I come in? The wards allowed me to approach, but they aren't coming down, and of course I don't want to tear them down."

She tried to respond, and the words clogged in her throat like tears. She cleared them out with a cough and began over. "Whatever you wish to say to me about Lucius Malfoy can be said from behind a closed door."

There was a pause, as though Harry hadn't expected that. Hawthorn wondered if he would leave now. He had once been so easy to drive away; he would back off the moment he poked an emotional wound. But this new Harry was—well, more formidable, and less afraid that if he made one mistake, it meant consequences his ally would never recover from.

"Very well, Hawthorn," Harry said, and oh damn him, his voice was still warm and he sounded as if he understood her position. "Madam Pomfrey told me that you left the hospital wing still muttering about vengeance. Why?"

You are not that stupid, Hawthorn thought, as she bolted straight and stared at the door. I know that you are not that stupid, Harry.

"Why?" she whispered.

“That’s what I said,” said Harry. She could hear him arranging himself comfortably, probably folding his arms, and putting up a protective layer of magic around his skin to keep himself safe from wards. “And it’s the whole substance of my first question, but I can rephrase it, if you would rather. Why did you leave the hospital wing muttering about vengeance?”

For a moment longer, Hawthorn tried to restrain herself, not to let the full storm of her temper burst on Harry. But this was too much. He knew exactly what Lucius had done to her, he had seen her at her weakest moment in Tullianum, he had helped her through other weak moments when Claudia was murdered and Pansy died, and he asked her this?

“Because he hurt me!” she shouted, and the words felt good as they ripped free of her, even if she would much rather be shouting them at Lucius. “Because this is the very last insult I can bear! I want to hurt him, to twist his neck until it breaks, to torture him until he knows as much pain as he’s given me! I can reach him, or I should be able to, and I can’t reach anyone else, and then he ran away! Traitor, coward, murderer—”

And the howl broke forth from her throat, streaming up in a prolonged, ululating cry that Hawthorn knew most people on the face of the earth would be nervous about. Even Muggles would shiver and rub their arms at the bloodthirsty call, and this near the full moon, those in the know about werewolves would run.

Harry was not most people. He remained silent until her howl faded, and then said, “May I come in, Hawthorn?”

Hawthorn lashed out. Her nails gashed long cuts in the door, and opened a series of holes through which she could see Harry’s face peering in at her. He really was leaning against the doorway, with not more than a foot separating them. And he refused to draw back or flinch when her nails slit the wood.

Damn him. Damn him, damn him, damn him!

Hawthorn wanted someone to hurt. She had passed the line of caring who it was, just as she hadn't cared when she saw the vision of Pansy that Indigena and not Lucius had killed her. She showed a mouthful of teeth, and snarled, "If you come in here with me, Harry, I will cause you pain."

There was another pause, and then Harry, his voice thoughtful, said, "I would like to see you try."

That was too much.

Hawthorn tore the door off its hinges, with that strength she so rarely used but now reveled in, and sprang out. Harry straightened to meet her, and then moved out of the way just in time with a half-dancing step that looked like something he might have practiced in his childhood.

And his face remained calm and mobile and understanding, and his eyes were without a trace of fear.

Damn him.

Hawthorn refused the temptation to attack as blindly and mindlessly as she had with Lucius. Instead, she aimed her wand and cast one of the most irritating blood curses she knew, nonverbally. It wouldn't hurt Harry like the ones she'd used on Indigena, but it would make him feel as if he had ants marching up and down his veins.

Harry deflected it with a lazy wave of his hand and a wandless Shield Charm.

She fell back with a snarl before she could help herself. For a moment, human rationality struggled to the surface. She was facing an immensely powerful wizard, one who could swat her like an insect if he really wanted to. Wouldn't it be better to calm down and not fight him? He wasn't her enemy. And if she gave up the anger and spoke to him, then he might come around to her way of thinking.

But the beast surged up when she remembered that she would collapse if she gave up the anger.

She went back to the attack, calling on the grass to rise. Perhaps she was not quite on Indigena Yaxley's level, but the Parkinsons had once been called "green blood," for the amount of gardening talent that ran in her family. She could and would use the earth around the Garden to hurt intruders.

The ground beneath Harry's feet turned to mud, and he started to slide downward. None of the traditional counters for such a thing would work on this mud, Hawthorn knew, since the earth itself was obeying her, and could not be coaxed back to hardness.

Harry didn't try the traditional counters, which involved drying charms. Instead, he simply left the ground and hovered above it, his magic spreading around him in the shape of luminous wings.

Hawthorn felt the magic in the air, and forcibly restrained herself from charging. She considered turning the rest of the ground to mud, but knew it wouldn't work. There was no reason that Harry had to land any time soon.

Instead, she turned to a curse she had learned from Evan Rosier, but rarely used. That meant she had to speak it aloud, but if it was unfamiliar to Harry, it still wouldn't warn him in time. "Aer adamanteus!" she cried, and felt it in satisfaction as the air hardened in Harry's lungs, turning to sharp blades. They would cut through the fragile tissue and skin in a moment, and then sling forward and slit him from the inside out, unless he knew the counter.

One part of her temper screamed at her. Hawthorn ignored it. It felt far too good to release the anger and hatred at last.

Harry closed his eyes in what looked almost like an expression of ecstasy as the blades began to slice out. And then he breathed, and Hawthorn saw that he had turned her weapons into two harmless puffs of air. They danced around his head like smoke rings, and then safely dissipated into the atmosphere.

Hawthorn was restricted to spells, while Harry could use wandless magic. She could not hurt him. It was not fair.

No. There is one weapon you have which he cannot match.

And there was, and she bolted forward, legs coiling beneath her for the leap, claws reaching. This close to the full moon, a werewolf's claws could scar even in human form. And she wanted to scar something, hurt something, tear something, and the people who were justified targets of her vengeance were all too far away.

She felt herself leave the ground. She saw the moment when Harry hung before her, face pale, eyes wide and green, and she thought he would allow himself to be gripped, held, ripped, torn, and in the middle of her intense, insane hatred she felt a gratitude that hurt every bit as badly as Lucius's betrayal had—

And then a whirl of magic clasped her and turned her, and the golden wings folded around her, feeling warm and living, the feathers slithering past her face like leaves. Hawthorn fought, crying out.

Harry settled back to the ground with her held in those magical wings. When she would have struggled free, she felt his arms come around her, and instinct and human memory made her hesitate for a single moment.

Then Harry began to sing.

Hawthorn had heard the phoenix voice before. She would never have described herself as vulnerable to it. She had been awed when she heard him singing at Midwinter, but they all had. She would not have given up her vengeance for Pansy if she heard him singing on the Midsummer battlefield.

And she was so tired. Why did she have to be the reasonable one, the witch who bore losses and went on living? No other single one of Harry's allies had suffered as much as she had. She had lost her family to the war. Fenrir Greyback had bitten her. She had been abused and tortured, and had failed to kill her enemies, the one thing that might have eased the burning losses. She had accepted Harry back into her life even though he had killed her husband. Surely she had reached a breaking point of some sort, and ought to be allowed

to pass it. Phoenix song should have had no attraction for her anymore, except as a kind of squeaky warbling.

And yet, it was happening.

Hawthorn found a vision forming in her head, fighting past the emotions that plagued her like a chick hammering its way out of the egg. It spread its own glittering wings, and Hawthorn realized she was looking at the aftermath of a battle. It might have been the Midsummer battle, though the vision was so arranged that she could not look behind her and see Hogwarts. There were bodies lying crumpled in front of her, and furrows in the ground coated with blood, and grass trampled and churned to broken earth, and twisted limbs and uprooted plants.

And the sun was rising.

She understood the vision. She was not stupid. Harry was calling on her—the song was calling on her—to realize that no matter how many battles wizards or Muggles fought, the sun went right on rising. The dead were dead, and gone. The living had to keep waking up and going forward, no matter how much it stung. They could not stop in one place and grieve, because they were not the dead, and for them it was not over.

Knowing that Harry had reason to understand that intimately made Hawthorn feel no better. She fought against the message, burying her head in her arms and moaning. The vision was inside her head. If she concentrated hard enough, then she could probably make it go away.

But she couldn't. And as the sun rose in her mind, its light caught and glittered on the dew, and the bodies began to vanish, as if someone had done the work of cleaning up the battlefield. The furrows slowly grew a new furze of grass, and the broken limbs became healthy young trees growing where they had fallen, and spring sprang out full blast on the spot. The earth forgot that there had been a battle fought here. And the sun ascended higher and higher, and the song blazed in her ears, demanding her compliance, calling her on.

If she were so weak that she would psychologically freeze herself out of life, then Harry would not have bothered. The phoenix would not have bothered. But Harry knew she was better than that, and that was why he called on her to rise. The only law of change was change.

It's not that easy, Hawthorn flung out in her head, as a bitter challenge. My husband and my daughter are dead.

And the vision changed, this time showing her the memorial she had planted in her garden, the hawthorn bush with the pansies and the dragonsbane growing around it. She had done this—sworn to remember them, planted living things for them, and then gone on walking down the path. It had been hard, but it had to be done. No one had ever said it was easy, in fact. The world was hard, and cruel. But it had to be lived in.

Hawthorn could, perhaps, have resisted sympathy. She would have resisted any vision of suffering equal to her own, which Light wizards in the past had used to try to persuade her that they were just as persecuted and hated as Death Eaters. But this vision of a hard and cruel world answered to her own expectations. The world could be ignored, but it did not cease to exist because one person grieved.

Every objection splintered and smashed against the reality of that song, against the growing need she had to answer it.

And then the song soared back steadily into the world of cruelty's mysteries, and it pulled her with it.

She was crying, the sobs racking her body, tears of fury and hatred burning down her cheeks. And Harry was singing still, wrapping her more with his voice than the hold of his arms, pouring into her ears vision after vision of roads to walk, of hills to climb, of ponds to scramble through.

It did not end until it ended.

And it did not matter how hard the burdens she had to carry were. She was not free to stop living. That was what she earned by being too fearless to kill herself. More life, and all the difficulty of it.

The last vision was of a path leading into a dusky gold sky, storm-colored, with weather Hawthorn couldn't see beyond that—perhaps sunlight, perhaps more storms. The phoenix song flirted its wings and tore forward, ending on a high-pitched, shining note of pure ringing uncertainty.

Hawthorn slowly lowered her hands from her eyes and stared at them.

“Perhaps that has purged it,” Harry said quietly.

And Hawthorn didn't apologize, because she didn't think she would know what to say. She simply knelt there in silence, instead, and Harry's arms wrapped around her, and they were both still, there in the great storm-colored world.

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Remus sniffed carefully at the air, and then let his tongue fall out to loll through his jaws. He loved full moon nights now with a heady impatient love he'd never felt when he was part of Loki's pack. Perhaps, then, the reins of purpose that stretched around his body, Loki's continual driving goal to win the war between wizards and werewolves, had never let him feel it.

He turned and nudged at the two wolves timidly crouched behind the corner. After a moment, wobbling on their paws like puppies, they trotted around it. Remus licked one face, nipped an ear, and prowled back and forth in front of them, examining them, studying their eyes for some hint of the glaze that would mean the Wolfsbane hadn't worked.

But it had. And he could forgive them their timidity. They were pups, in a sense. This was their first transformation. They had been Muggles until last month, when they had finally convinced Hawk that they wanted the bite, and weren't content to remain behind in the safehouse while the pack ran. Hawk had bitten them himself, but had waited until the last full moon night of April. He wanted them to have a month to get used to the notion that they would be exchanging one conformation of bone and muscle for another, a month to feel the

moon singing in their blood and their senses growing sharper and their world shifting along with them.

The wolf on the right had been a Muggle girl called Georgina. Now she made a lovely fawn bitch, with brown brindles starting low on her sides and rippling over her legs. Her companion, who called himself simply Tal, was a slim black beast, built more for speed than the usual endurance.

And they would both join the bulk of the pack waiting for them, if Remus could only get them moving.

He made his nips fiercer this time, and bit them under their tails. Georgina squealed and started trotting. Tal resisted for a moment more, then tossed his head and tore down the street. Remus loped after them.

He felt the moment when it changed for them. Tal lifted his head and flicked back his ears. Georgina tilted her neck back to sniff the air, then almost sat down on her haunches with the wonder of it all.

Hawk's howl rose from ahead of them, calling them on, sweeping them up, adding a trill or note for each one of them. He was a good alpha, Remus had found in the past six months, never forgetting a pack member's name, and treasuring every single one of his wolves.

Georgina and Tal answered, and Remus, too, their voices blending with the voices of the eight other wolves, both the members of Hawk's original pack and the turned Muggles and wizards and witches of the last few months, who were padding forward now from around corners and up alleys. They would run London tonight, joining with other packs, and the Muggles would be half-sure they were feral dogs and half-sure they were something else. It didn't matter, though, how long or how far they chased; carefully-placed Concealment Charms, cast before the transformation and scattered around the city, and the werewolves' sheer speed insured that the Muggles never caught them.

And each day, their world and the wizarding one blended together just a little more.

Remus stretched his legs, and sped past both Georgina and Tal, making them try to catch him. They could try if they liked. Remus fully intended to show them his tail all the way through the run, which was made not for hunting's sake but for sheer joy.

As he bounded up a street towards where Hawk stood awaiting them on the doorstep of the neighboring pack's safehouse, the moon briefly blazed out from the clouds overhead, and Remus gave tongue again, in glory and exultation and glee at being alive.

Chapter Eighty-Eight: From Adalrico's Hand

"Minister. May I speak to you for a moment in private?"

Rufus glanced up casually. He had been expecting Juniper to approach him almost from the moment the Wizengamot had agreed to suspend discussion of the werewolf packs' activities for the day, but he was surprised the man had done so in front of Elder Hollyshead, a well-known rival of Juniper's. He won't believe that we're in collusion, no matter how much Juniper wants him to. "Of course, Elder," he said. "Let me finish this conversation, and we can converse here quickly, so that you might get home at a reasonable hour."

Juniper gave a faint, inflexible movement of his lips that could look like a smile, if studied under the right light. "I may have exaggerated when I said that I wished to speak to you for a 'moment,' Minister," he said. "We should adjourn to your office to have our conversation, I think."

Rufus simply nodded and faced Hollyshead again, whose bright yellow eyes darted between them in a reasonable display of suspicion. "Was there anything else that you wished to ask me, Elder?"

The older man—substantially older even than Juniper, treading the edge of ninety—drew himself up with a sudden shake and a rustle of his long silver beard. "No, no, Scrimgeour," he said. "I can see that Elder Juniper has urgent business to share. And my daughter will be expecting me." He patted Rufus's arm and then strode towards one of the private Floo connections that led from Wizengamot members' houses to Courtroom Ten.

Rufus faced Juniper again. "I don't see anyone else who wishes to talk to me, Elder. Shall we go?"

They started out of the courtroom together, but were necessarily somewhat separated by the Aurors who came up to walk between them. Rufus wondered if Juniper's slightly narrowed eyes were a

result of the fact that Rufus felt he needed protection to walk back to his office, or because he had underestimated the Aurors' loyalty.

That was somewhat comforting, Rufus thought, as he placed a hand on his hip in the small gesture that soothed his bad leg. The worse the news got, from the other Ministries and the Wizengamot's insistence that he "do something" about the werewolf packs, the closer the Aurors seemed to bond to him. It wasn't just those who had always been loyal, like Hope and Wilmot. Some Rufus had never known to do more than grunt and nod when he issued an order now noticed when Percy was a moment late to the office or when Rufus's leg hurt especially badly.

If it comes to a coup, at least I know the Aurors will not join it.

Then Rufus shook his head sharply. He couldn't afford to think of such a thing, to prepare for such an eventuality, when there was no sign that anyone else was. Otherwise he would strike out with violence long before anyone else dreamed of it. There had been no violently overthrown Ministers in the last hundred years. That was a record worth preserving. They could cast him out by a vote of no confidence, or try to limit his power if the pressure from the public and the other countries grew intense, but they would not try to murder him.

Perhaps. Not if the Aurors are not with them.

Rufus put such thoughts away when he entered his office and saw Percy rising to his feet, his arms full of paperwork. "Sir," Percy began, and then paused, blinking a little at the sight of his visitor.

"Elder Juniper and I have some things to speak about in private, Percy," Rufus said smoothly, and gestured to the door. "Now, I know for a fact that Auror Arrow will give you another Stealth and Hiding task tomorrow. Why don't you go and practice for it?"

Percy was not stupid. He put down the paperwork, nodded, and made his way to the door. He did pause on the way out and stare hard at Juniper. Rufus blinked. The gaze was more like one of the adult Aurors' than he would have expected. Though Percy had not

finished his training, he had their full sense of stubbornness and protectiveness towards the Minister, it seemed.

The door clicked to, and Rufus lifted his wards. Juniper twisted his lips in a small smile as he sat down in the chair in front of his desk. "You have him well-trained, don't you?"

"I'm the one who saw his potential and brought him into the Auror program," said Rufus, which neatly elided the issue of influence and how close he actually was to Percy, and leaned back in his own chair with a contented little sigh. His leg did hurt more lately. A sign of advancing age, he knew, and potions could only do so much to quell the pain. "Now, Elder. I noticed that you didn't speak up much in the Wizengamot's debate. Given your well-known feelings on werewolves, I was wondering why."

"Perhaps I felt that nothing anyone else said could fully express the magnitude of my thoughts on the matter," said Juniper. The smile had fallen away from his face, and his hands made slow movements that reminded Rufus of someone braiding a rope. "Yes, I hate werewolves, Minister. But if I thought they could contribute to the wizarding world I love and have fought so hard to preserve, then I would welcome them in regardless."

"And?" Rufus asked levelly. He made sure his hand had a clear path to his wand, and told his thoughts to be sensible and calm.

"It is my considered, carefully weighted belief that werewolves cannot contribute to that world." Juniper stared at him. "It is, in fact, my belief that the inclusion of werewolves in the wizarding world, the attempt to give them equal rights, actively harms it."

Rufus took an entertaining moment to imagine what would have happened if Juniper had said that to Harry instead of him. He wondered if Juniper would still be shaking in his chair from the cold of the ice that would have coated the walls from Harry's temper.

Unfortunately, he was not Harry, and could not rely on glares and powerful magic to make his point. He had to settle for raising his

eyebrows, and sitting there with them raised, until Juniper flushed very slightly and glanced away.

“So you’re against giving rights to people who are human for ninety percent of the year,” said Rufus. “Fascinating, Elder. It’s no wonder you haven’t spoken that opinion in public yet.” It would be political suicide to do so. Many people still didn’t support werewolves, but carrying out certain actions in private and speaking the words aloud were two completely different things.

“If it were only those werewolves who register and accept Wolfsbane, and otherwise live like wizards?” Juniper shook his head, his jaw clenched. “Then I would not have a problem with it. But there are the packs, Minister, and the packs are the ones letting the Muggles into our world, according to that article. They define themselves as a different culture, and independent of our laws. Separating ourselves from them would be no more than doing what both sides want.

“Unfortunately, it’s not that simple, not when their telling Muggles about us can expose wizards to danger as well. So I suggest, Minister, that we make telling such secrets punishable with the rescinding of their rights, including access to Wolfsbane. Werewolves who can demonstrate that they’ve never engaged in such behavior will of course continue to receive it.”

“And so you’ll turn some of our people back into ravening monsters, and encourage attacks like those happening last year, for the sake of making a point?”

“There is no other way to get through to them, Minister.” Juniper leaned forward. “They’re not normal wizards anymore. They’ve cut themselves off. I’ve studied the way a packmind works. It binds the members of the pack together, and makes them consider those people and only those people as mattering, as worthy of mattering, as important. That means that an alpha won’t care that he’s putting people outside the pack in danger. He might even let someone close to him run without Wolfsbane if she wanted to. They truly change when bitten, Minister.”

“I’ve heard that before,” said Rufus. “From Amelia Bones, in the full extremity of her cowardice. And I will not be swayed on this, Elder. The werewolves received their equal rights because they were willing to fight for them, and because Harry was willing to fight for them, but it is to the Ministry’s shame that they were not granted for so long. They should have been granted at once. We should have treated house elves better than we did. Goblins, too, and centaurs. I will not allow such disgusting ideas to make a comeback, as long as I sit in the Minister’s office. Get out.”

Juniper rose slowly to his feet, never taking his eyes from Rufus’s face. Rufus simply looked at him. He thought Juniper probably expected him to be red-faced and blustering, but instead he was pale, and had not felt so cool-tempered in a long time.

“As long as you sit in the Minister’s office,” Juniper repeated thoughtfully. “That may not be long, you realize.”

Rufus lifted his head and let his teeth show, and even his wand, peeking up in his hand over the edge of the desk. “Has no one told you that it might not be the most intelligent thing in the world to make such threats, sir?”

The amusement vanished from Juniper’s face, and he leaned forward. Rufus brought his wands up further, but Juniper showed no sign of intending to attack him. Instead, he stared, and spoke again, his words slow and careful, heavy, as if he were imploring Rufus to believe him.

“I act as honestly as I can, as often as I can,” he said. “I know what I love in the wizarding world, and stand for. I know it’s not popular to feel that the core of our world are those wizards who have done the most to keep our traditions alive and our people safe—the Light purebloods. Nor is it popular to dislike the vates and feel he has gone too far in trying to grant rights to magical creatures, rights that come at the expense of wizards’. But I do feel those things, and I will say them. And I will continue to fight for the center of the wizarding world, the part that must survive, no matter what others may think of me for it or what words I need to use in public.

“Neither do I make threats, Minister. I am only warning you that discontent against you runs deep. Some of that comes from the Ritual of Cincinnatus, but even more comes from the way you’ve dealt with the vates. Someone should have taken the boy in hand the moment the abuse by his parents was discovered—and we have learned that you had access to such information more than three years ago, when the boy’s mother applied for guardianship of him after being stripped of her magic. You did not investigate. The matter was left to rest, and it should not have been. What it has led to is an image of you under Harry’s thumb.”

“And why is that?” Rufus asked. He was not entirely sure that he could trust what Juniper was telling him. On the other hand, the Elder’s reputation for honesty was well-known.

“Because you bowed to his rebellion,” said Juniper quietly, “an open use of illegal force against the Ministry. Because you have made an effort to pursue and prosecute criminals who were linked to Harry in some way; the trial of his parents should have taken longer to arrange than it did. Because your glancing the other way, and the tampering with paperwork to keep him free of his parents’ custody, has been noted.” He hesitated a long moment, then shook his head. “Look here, Rufus,” he said, dropping all titles. “I don’t want to see you gone. I find you more reasonable than most of the people who might take your place. But neither can I commit to following a Minister who follows someone else.”

“I have never done so,” Rufus answered, knowing his voice was thick with passion, and not caring. This conversation would damage Juniper as severely as him if Juniper put it in a Pensieve and showed it to others. “I have always done what I feel is best for the wizarding world. It’s a fact that the Ministry has had to spend the last fifty years dealing with British Lord-level wizards, since Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald and showed his full power. We botched it during the First War. This time, we have to steer a course between shoals. I will give Harry an ear. That does not mean I give him my hands, my back, or my brain.”

Juniper contemplated him in silence for a long time. Then he said, “But you may believe the Ministry’s good coincides with Harry’s.”

“Because it may. It often has, given the way Harry reasons and argues.”

“And sometimes we may need to disassociate ourselves from him, if only to protect our own interests.” Juniper shook his head, and his eyes had gone dark again, with a warning that Rufus had to wonder about. Did it actually match what he was saying? “You may believe as you like, Minister. But, at times, you may need to act an independent course from Harry, if only to prove your independence.”

“And I do not believe the werewolf issue is one where I need to do so, or could give a convincing performance if I tried.” Rufus folded his hands on the desk in front of him and stared at Juniper. “You may depart now, Elder. It seems as though we have little to say to each other.”

“I think you value some of the same things I do, sir.” Juniper still stubbornly lingered. “You value the continuity of tradition in the Light, and the way that Light wizards have traditionally supported something far greater than themselves: the peace and safety of all wizarding Britain. We have sometimes operated on an ethics of sacrifice, yes, but we have proven as ready to sacrifice ourselves as others. I wish you could take that into account, rather than simply assuming that our voice is one among many, of no greater account than another. You are sworn to Light yourself, and are part of that proud history. You know what we have done.”

“And sometimes, failed to do,” said Rufus, thinking of Dumbledore, thinking of the way that Light wizards had also refused to release their house elves because doing so would lose them status or convenience. “Light does not mean good, Juniper. I would have thought you would understand that.”

“In this day and age, it does,” said Juniper. “We are the only defense against the coming storm.”

“If a storm is rising,” said Rufus, “we will need Harry to fight it.”

Juniper did not speak again. He merely bowed, eyes still dark, and then turned and swished through the door.

Rufus took a deep breath and sat back. His head was pounding, and his belly shook, and in general he felt half-hollowed.

He stood, and did what he always did when he felt this way and was alone: began to make himself a cup of tea.

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"I didn't say that I disagreed with you," said Draco, looking as if he were fighting hard to keep his temper. "I just said that now might not be the best time to demand equal rights for children like Jacinth, Harry."

"I don't see why not." Harry finished the letter, looked it over carefully, and then nodded. He'd explained the situation, giving enough generalities that anyone reading the letter could guess what it was about, but none of the specifics that might have led to Lazuli's arrest. He tapped the letter, and it began to replicate itself with a calm crinkling and folding of paper. One copy would go to every member of the Wizengamot. "If we wait and wait, then who says that a better time will ever come?"

"Yes, but the werewolves?" Draco leaned back against the pillow with a groan. "I just think you should wait until the Wizengamot's not so agitated, Harry. They're still debating whether they should pull the concessions that they granted the werewolves after the rebellion, you know that."

"Of course I know that." Harry left the letters to their self-copying and stood, crossing to Draco so that he could drop a kiss on his cheek. Then he nudged him over. Draco fell with a surprised grunt, and Harry started massaging his shoulders. He had found in the past few days that it tended to neutralize Draco's objections as well as relaxing him enough for him to sleep. "But they should know that if they do that, I'll just begin another rebellion."

There probably wasn't a touch in the world that could have kept Draco relaxed through that. He stiffened, then rolled out from under Harry's hands and reached up to clasp his wrist. "Harry, you wouldn't."

Harry looked at him calmly. Draco had lost all sorts of arguments to him in the last week. That was because, this time, unlike the argument they'd had over the thestrals, Draco didn't have a legitimate personal objection to Harry's behavior. He could only try to persuade him, and usually Harry had thought out his reasoning already. So Harry looked at him patiently, and looked at him calmly, and Draco had come to give up within a few moments of staring.

This time, though, his hold on Harry's wrist only tightened. "You can't," Draco whispered. "Damn it, Harry, I don't want to lose you."

Hmmm. That isn't something he's said before. "You wouldn't lose me," said Harry, gently stroking his palm with a fingertip. "Why would you think me more likely to die in this second rebellion than the first?"

"That's not what I meant." Draco heaved himself onto his knees and shifted his hand so that Harry couldn't move his finger anymore. "Harry—the political climate is different now than it was before the rebellion. People are warier of you, because now they know you might break from the Ministry openly, whereas before they could never have suspected it. I don't want to lose you to the passion of the fight."

"I still don't know what you mean." And Harry didn't. His puzzlement increased at the desperation in Draco's eyes. Draco and Snape had become more and more worried over him in the last few days, and Harry couldn't figure out what he was doing to make them so fearful. If he knew, then he would stop it.

Draco swallowed several times before he spoke. "I—Harry, you've been so intense these last few weeks. You've done what's needed when it's needed, I can't deny that. But I've never felt like you were with me the way you have been at other times. I always felt like you were either thinking about me or thinking about something else. Never just lying beside me in the bed, at home in your own body."

“Oh.” Well, that made sense, Harry supposed, in its own way. He hadn’t often had so many concerns continuing at one time.

Or he hadn’t been so good at balancing them before. Harry thought that was more likely the cause of Draco’s worry.

“You’re used to seeing me more obsessive, on the edge of collapse, or throwing myself into one crisis,” he said, and leaned forward to kiss Draco’s nose. “So you’re waiting for the collapse to come, aren’t you?”

Draco’s face turned red.

“I don’t blame you,” Harry told him cheerfully. “I have done that. This time, though, I promise, I’ve learned my lesson. The minute you see me doing something self-destructive, you have my permission to tie me to the bed and sit on me until I listen. All right?” A soft rustle behind him let him know the letters had finished replication, and he rolled off the bed to take them to the Owlery. A side effect of having to use Levitation Charms for so many months was that he’d grown very good at them. He could easily have the letters surround him in a floating halo now, which would take up a little more room in the corridor but be better for the ink.

“Harry...”

He glanced over his shoulder. Draco was biting his lip, staring at him in the same desperation. Harry settled the irritation that wanted to rise. He’d just figured out what was going on. That didn’t mean he could expect Draco to smile at him and let him go off without a concern. “Yes?”

Draco stretched out his hand, then let it fall and shook his head. “Come to me if you want someone to talk to,” he said.

Harry nodded. “Of course. You would be my first choice for most things, Draco, even before Snape or Connor.” He tried a sunny smile, wondering if his expressions hadn’t been bright enough to reassure Draco.

If anything, that only increased the sharpness of his stare. Harry ended up shaking his head in bewilderment and escorting the letters towards the Owlery. He would do what he could to ease Draco's preoccupations, but it seemed that no amount of reason would soothe them entirely. Probably Draco just needed time, to see that Harry had endured day after day without falling apart, and he would relax as the unusual became routine with the passage of time.

Then he switched his mind to thinking about the probable reactions to his letters. He smirked a bit. Not good, but Lazuli had told him that she'd talked to other parents she knew of, both Light and Dark, who had half-human children like Jacinth, and they were ready for him to move now, to let the wizarding world at large know about them. If someone made lucky guesses and tried to question them, few—except those like Lazuli, who had slept with species it was illegal even to speak of—would deny it. They were still gathering strength, but their storm was ready to burst on the wizarding world at any moment.

Besides, Harry thought the Wizengamot's distraction over the werewolves might actually serve him well. Split their attention onto two fronts, and they could concentrate less on either taking packs' rights away or prosecuting the parents of children who were not half-Veela.

Sometimes things changed slowly, and suddenly they came to a sudden crackling burst of growth. Harry was used to them both. He thought it was about time the wizarding world had a chance to get used to the latter.

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Draco worried his lip between his teeth and stared at the canopy of their bed. He told himself he was worrying too much. He told himself that his political instincts were not infallible—not yet—and that even if Harry was making a mistake with these letters, it would not cost him every ally he had. Too many of his allies had blemishes themselves, in the eyes of wizarding society. Why would a werewolf or a former Death Eater assume she couldn't fight next to Harry because he was

supporting a parent who'd slept with someone nonhuman to sire or bear a child?

It isn't that. I know it's more than that. I know that Harry, for one thing, still hasn't talked to anyone about what he feels for my father, or what he did to heal his mother—and now that Joseph has gone back to the Sanctuary, he may never talk to anyone.

Except that that wasn't true, either. Harry had talked to Hawthorn Parkinson about her grief; Draco knew that. He had talked to Snape when nightmares plagued him. He had certainly heard Draco's side of the story about Lucius often enough in the last few weeks.

And as for what Draco most wanted to know, it showed no sign of tearing Harry apart, and he seemed honestly puzzled when asked questions about his mental health. Draco thought he knew Harry well enough to tell when he was hiding something. He was not hiding anything about Lucius or his mother, not this time.

I really don't understand. Maybe I am just overprotective of him.

And then Draco paused, having a sudden idea about what he might be able to ask for, what might help him find out if Harry's reactions were honestly changed or if he was ignoring his feelings again, perhaps with the same use of Occlumency he'd tried in Woodhouse. The best part was, he didn't need to ask for this gift for another ten days or so, which meant that he had time to observe Harry's reactions and decide for himself whether Harry was faking it or not.

Satisfied, Draco closed his eyes and lay as if asleep, though he listened for a sound of Harry's return.

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Harry stood waiting quietly in Blackstone's entrance hall. The house was dim, as though too much light would be an insult to the Dark family who lived there. Or maybe that was just to emphasize the paintings on the walls. Harry could make out figures, twisted limbs and beckoning hands and smiles, but not whole bodies. The effect

was rather striking. He walked towards a painting that claimed it was called “The Procession of Death” on the plaque beneath.

“Harry. Thank you for coming.”

He turned. Adalrico stood behind him, in the entrance to what Harry assumed was a study. He was trying to smile. It didn’t work very well.

“You asked me to, sir.” Harry moved a few steps forward, never looking away from Adalrico’s face. He wasn’t using Legilimency, but perhaps the piercing quality of his gaze was still too much for Adalrico, who abruptly turned away from him and retreated into the room.

“Won’t you come in?”

And he did, though he still tried to tell from Adalrico’s shoulders and spine what the matter was. Why would Adalrico have invited Harry to his family’s home and then be upset when he arrived?

The study—for so it was—was also dim, the walls decorated in gray and black, the carpet a dark red that almost swallowed the firelight. Adalrico settled heavily into a chair in front of the hearth. Harry stood across from him until Adalrico gestured him to be seated, and sat only on the edge of the cushion. He had the persistent feeling that he would have to move sharply in a moment.

“I mean you no harm,” said Adalrico tightly, eyes focused on the flames. “It is rather an insult to act as if I do, Harry.”

“You are not acting normally, either, sir,” Harry said, deciding that now wasn’t the time for the name “Adalrico,” no matter how he thought of the man. “Forgive me for expressing honestly how I feel.”

Adalrico took a deep breath, and leaned over to pick up a glass jar from next to the chair. Harry kept a close eye on the contents as Adalrico turned it idly back and forth. It looked like a collection of black flakes. Ashes? Perhaps, but Harry would not wager on that, especially once he saw that Adalrico, for all his toying with the jar’s lid, didn’t remove it.

"These are the last Black Plague spores that I created for Voldemort," said Adalrico abruptly, looking at him.

Harry hissed before he could stop himself. The disease had claimed an enormous toll in lives during the First War. If anyone had actually been able to prove that Adalrico had created them of his own free will and not because he was under Imperius, then he would still have been in Azkaban when Voldemort rose again.

"I haven't used them," said Adalrico, staring at the jar. "But I have wanted to use them, several times, in the years since his fall."

"Especially on the Starrise estate, sir?" Harry asked sharply.

Adalrico looked up, caught his eye, and reacted badly to whatever he saw there, shoulders stiffening. "You know my grievance against the family," he said. "What Pharos Starrise did was outside the bounds of all proper decorum. I had a right to be offended and angry."

"You did," Harry agreed. "You also had a right to think about what it would mean to act against Starrise, the family of which Tybalt is a part. Tybalt is also a part of the Alliance, and acting against an Alliance comrade is punished by a draining of magic." He heard his voice grow sharper and sharper, but he did not care. "I have had one weakness, one betrayal, among those Dark wizards closest to me, sir. I will not tolerate another."

"I said only that I have wanted to use them. Not that I had."

"And you will give them to me so that you are not tempted to use them again?" Harry held out his hand.

Adalrico looked away from him.

"Why show them to me, unless you intended to hand them over?" Harry pressed, suddenly understanding Adalrico's nervousness in a new light. He had called Harry here to present the spores to him, Harry was almost sure, and then changed his mind. But by then, it would have looked extremely suspicious to tell Harry not to come, not when he hadn't given a reason in the first place. "Sir. I know that you

have changed. I know that you resent the Starrises, with good reason. But if you allow those feelings to influence you into acting against people who have never done you harm, then you cannot be part of this Alliance.”

“And if I had used those spores only against Pharos?” Adalrico asked. “If I had never told you about them?”

Harry felt the atmosphere in the room shimmer and grow darker. Almost certainly, Blackstone’s wards were responding to their master’s mood. He called his own power, and the air draped around his shoulders grew into a serpent, which lifted its head, hissing lazily. The Many snake around his throat also stirred and inflated her hood.

“I would have recognized the signs,” said Harry, unmoving, deepening and tightening the ice he’d locked around his more volatile emotions. “I studied the First War, sir. I know that this kind of weapon is too dangerous to be unleashed again. Someone in the Ministry could have studied it if you used it against Pharos, and sooner or later it might have emerged on a battlefield. If you use it, I will stop at nothing to drain your magic.”

Adalrico stared at him, eyes reflecting a depth of hatred Harry had never seen him show before. He knew none of it was directed at him, but that didn’t diminish his own stare. If Adalrico couldn’t obey the rules, he could damn well leave the Alliance. Harry wasn’t going to entertain another serpent in the breast.

And then the moment passed, and Adalrico lowered his eyes and looked away from him. Harry breathed carefully, not moving any other part of his body, and both his black snake and the Many cobra held still, waiting for his command.

“I—I’ll give them to you,” Adalrico whispered, and waved his wand to Levitate the jar of spores over to Harry. “But that doesn’t mean I have stopped hating Pharos Starrise. It should be my right to put an end to him.”

“You can’t,” Harry said, catching the jar and nodding his thanks. The lid was sealed with a powerful locking charm that, so far as he could

tell with a short inspection, hadn't been tampered with. "Perhaps if he had attacked you in a place other than the Ministry, yes. But he's in Ministry custody now. Try to murder him, and you'll be arrested."

"You could change things so that that was not true," Adalrico suggested, voice barely above a murmur.

The black serpent reared, hissing. Harry said quietly, "Never ask me something like that again."

Adalrico looked away from him.

Harry waited to see if he would say anything else, but minutes passed, and nothing happened. At last, Harry stood, and dismissed the black snake. It did not go easily. He must have been angrier than he knew.

"I still care for you, sir," he said. "Even if you had never been my ally, I would value you as Millicent's father. And you have helped me in the past. But I will not tolerate this stupid striving after vengeance that damages all of us. Pharos Starrise didn't learn that lesson in time. Don't let him drag you down with him."

He walked out of Blackstone, and Apparated back to Hogwarts, where he stood some time on the path back from Hogsmeade, breathing the spring air and staring off into the Forbidden Forest.

Then he crouched down and carefully called intense heat to destroy the glass jar and the Black Plague spores inside it. He burned them so hot that neither spores nor fumes could escape into the open air. The glass turned to slag, the spores to less than dust, less than ashes.

And then he had to pause to renew, once again, the deep ice at the back of his mind, which had filled his mind with clarity for the past few weeks and helped him get what he needed to get done.

I will not use such foul weapons. I will not permit Adalrico to kill Pharos merely to satisfy his lust for vengeance. There are some things I will not do.

And then those concerns retreated like the scrim of oil they were. It had nearly happened, but in the end it had not. And if Adalrico had not given him all the Black Plague spores...well, Harry would trust him until he had proven he could not be trusted. But he would watch him a little more closely from now on.

He walked calmly towards the castle, already reviewing what he needed to do next in his head.

Intermission: Purple, Silver, Green

Severus was adding a drop of unicorn's tears to the green potion when he felt the pain flare up in his left arm. Carefully, he tapped the vial to get the last of the tears out, then set it down and turned to fetch his cloak and mask. The burning grew worse in his arm, but not so bad that he could not function. His Lord knew that he needed some extra time to get beyond the wards so that he could Apparate.

Just as he made his way towards the closet at the back of his office that led to a tunnel, which itself led out onto the grounds, someone knocked on his door. Severus groaned and turned. It would be his luck that some member of his House needed help or comfort now. Quickly casting a Disillusionment Charm on his robe and mask, and keeping a stoic expression on his face that belied the burning coming from his left arm, he opened the door.

Albus stood there, his face taut with excitement. "Severus," he whispered. "You must come with me. The Order has received intelligence from one of Voldemort's victims that he is ready to begin a raid in Ireland. We will be Apparating there to stop him."

Severus concealed another groan. That was, very likely, the raid in which he was supposed to be participating.

He held up his left arm in silent answer. Albus's eyes narrowed at it, then at him.

"This raid will be on homes with defenseless Muggle families and children, Severus," he said. "I am afraid that I must ask you to come with us this time. Conceal your face, but do not add your wand to the other side."

Severus's consternation enabled his thoughts to soar above the pain. There was a time when Albus would never have asked him for that. Since he assumed his little spy was loyal to him, he would have trusted Severus to avoid casting curses at Order members, and to avoid any killing that was not absolutely necessary to make a point in front of another Death Eater.

Now he didn't trust him to that extent.

Perhaps he has not trusted me since the graveyard. It would explain why I didn't know anything about Connor Potter's training or location.

His eyes on Albus, he made his decision. The burning in his left arm was growing more urgent, but only slowly so, like acid constantly replenished with stronger and stronger forms of itself. First it would eat skin, then flesh, then muscle, then bone. But he had time.

And he had a pawn he could sacrifice to insure that Albus would think about other things in a short while, and suffer for binding him like this.

"Very well," he agreed, and Albus beamed and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Splendid, my boy! We'll be Apparating from the gates in a few moments." And Albus turned and strode away.

He trusts me a little, then. His mistake.

Severus bent and slid his wand over his left wrist, invoking the communication spell that Charles Rosier-Henlin had taught the Death Eaters a week ago, when he'd finally, finally been persuaded into coming to the Dark Lord's side. "My Lord," he murmured, and heard the intense hissing of a snake rise. "The old fool commands my presence on the phoenix's side of the raid. I will work what havoc I can there, and return to you as soon as I can."

There was silence for a moment. Then his Lord's voice said, "Go, Severus, faithful servant." Severus felt the intense thrill at the sound of his own name that he'd felt since he followed Voldemort's advice and started thinking of himself by his first name again instead of his last.

And the burning in his left arm stopped.

Severus shook his head and blinked. He must trust me indeed, to put off showing his displeasure while I do this task for him.

That only increased his determination to make his absence from his Lord's side worthwhile. He strode towards the gates, his mind racing as he sought for the best way to do what he wanted and make Albus pay.

And then he paused in mid-stride, his whole body shivering with a dark delight.

He could not—

Could he?

He had not tested all the limitations on his potions. What he wanted to do might be possible, but there was a stronger chance that it was not. And he did not want to embarrass himself by failing.

But if he did it carefully enough, no one else would ever know, and he could keep any failure to himself.

Severus nodded, and sped up, arriving at the gates at the same moment as Minerva. She gave him a narrow-eyed look, then stepped forward and received the vision of the field in Ireland from a tap of Albus's wand.

Severus did the same thing. For a moment, he was close to his old master, and could meet those blue, twinkling eyes that did their best to see into his soul. But Severus had been Occlumens enough to fool a more powerful Legilimens for years, and he did not flinch away from that gaze.

Albus smiled at him, then tapped his head and sent the vision into Severus's memory. Like the other Order members, he Apparated.

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He easily ignored the carnage around him, the blood, the broken limbs. There was a time he would have found it troubling, when he still believed that the Death Eaters should have some grace that the other side did not. Now, he realized that the only grace or beauty anyone brought anywhere was what he carried with him, and he and

his Lord did enough with contributing beauty and grace to the Dark. At times, in particular moods, Bellatrix or Evan helped too.

They were helping now, torturing a Muggle woman between them, sending her reeling from one pain to another. Severus reveled in the screaming, and felt a moment's urge to protest when Minerva mercy-killed her.

Then he remembered his plan, and felt his mouth move in a deep smile. He turned and fixed his gaze on James Potter. He'd had to overcome his cowardice, because Albus insisted that every member of the Order of the Phoenix be a fighter, and currently he was dueling with two Death Eaters who were backing him towards his wife and son. Connor Potter led them, of course, because he had to, the intermittent flashes of spells catching his heart-shaped scar and making it gleam as if filled with blood.

Severus concentrated. He'd fed James the silver potion months ago, but it should still be vibrating along his veins, the liquid equivalent of the Imperius Curse, enabling Severus to command him.

Come here.

James turned and lurched like an automaton away from the two Death Eaters, and towards Severus. His opponents paused, momentarily confused, and then turned and shrugged and found other targets.

His old rival halted in front of him. Severus took a deep breath of satisfaction, and then held out his wand and cast an illusion of the Dark Mark on James's left arm. It wouldn't hold up to testing, and would not enable the man to feel a summons from the Dark Lord, but in a moment's glimpse, it looked quite convincing.

"Go," he said quietly. He would have loved to send James after his son, but his Lord had been explicit: no one was to kill the boy but him, and the Dark Lord had not yet appeared on the battlefield, though Severus knew he was close and watching. "You know who to aim for."

James nodded, his hazel eyes full of steel and dreams, and then turned and lurched forward. In a few moments, though, he was walking smoothly, his Auror training and the intense duels of the past few months sharpening his stride. He ducked and weaved past the Order members, and came up close behind Connor Potter, whose spells, Severus had to admit, were effective at blasting his enemies away. They were Death Eaters Severus didn't care about, though, so they were no great loss.

James halted in front of Lily, and held up his left arm so that she could see the Dark Mark. Her eyes widened dramatically.

Severus was sure a lull fell over that part of the battle, so that everyone near could hear James say, "Avada Kedavra."

The green light struck his wife. She slumped. For a moment, James stood blank-eyed, staring.

And then his son hit him, screaming, casting Cutting Curses that he shouldn't know over and over, slicing his father's body apart, sending blood to cover his robes, and then his mother's corpse, as James slumped on top of Lily's body.

Severus released his control, so that no one could find any trace of his mind in James's, and then turned and faced the east, knowing instinctively that his Lord was there at that moment. Voldemort's gleaming red eyes met his.

His Lord was pleased. A hissing voice whispered his name over and over in his ears. "Severus, Severus, Severussss..."

And he, who had survived to serve two masters and then chosen the best one when he could no longer be a double agent, reveled in it.

Best of all was the tragic look in Albus's eyes as he wrapped his arms around the Potter boy and tugged him away from his dead parents, forcing him to face his oncoming doom, his destiny.

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Severus woke with an edge of gladness and joy still riding his mind. He did not remember the dream any more than he usually did, but he was just as glad to have dreamt of something bright instead of dark for once.

He checked the potions. The purple one was finished completely now, and had been for some time, simply shimmering in its cauldron and now and then uttering a slow bubble like swamp water. The silver one had a light, misty cloud above it, one ingredient reacting with another. Severus waved his wand and dissipated the cloud, then set the cauldron to slow simmering again. He planned to ask Harry if he could use the potion on him soon, since it seemed that there were once again wounds in his son's mind, and this should work to cure him.

The green potion—

Severus shook his head with a faint, fond smile. He could not wait until the green potion was ready.

The world lurched suddenly, and Snape put a hand to his head, feeling slightly ill. Had something just happened?

Nothing more than the departure of his mood and a more normal one asserting itself, he supposed. Euphoria never stayed long with him. He scowled as he remembered thinking about the wounds in Harry's mind. They had almost certainly been caused by contact with his parents again.

Determined, this time, to see into the bottom of Harry's mind and find out just how much he was hurting, Snape stalked out of his offices. Harry had been behaving too well these last weeks. It was time to see what that kind of behavior was costing him.

Chapter Eighty-Nine: Luna's Gift

Luna slipped her hand gently out of Padma's and stood. They had been studying for the length of time it would take hippogriff teeth to break apart in salt water. That meant that Luna had to go now, and hunt the object that hated the whole world.

"Luna?"

Padma was looking at her with a worried expression, but she had no reason to worry. Luna was walking down friendly stairs, and by now all the portraits and the other wary objects in the castle knew her and would watch out for her. Even if Luna fell out of sight of a thing which could talk to humans, the things that could see her would talk to the portraits, and the portraits would talk to someone else. Luna was carefully guarded as she had never been before, which was good, because Luna found it as hard to talk to other people sometimes as if she were made of stone herself.

"I'll come back when the moon-glass is full," she promised, and flicked her wand at an hourglass that stood on their table and would brighten as the moon arose. The hourglass came to life at the enchantment, singing out gratitude for being used. Luna liked the moon-glass, but she did wish it would be quieter sometimes; it was so loud it drowned other voices out. She kissed Padma and made her way through the Ravenclaw common room, pausing at the door.

The door was telling over the tales of its opening during the day to itself, since it didn't expect any more visitors. To many doors in the castle, curfew meant the time they wouldn't be opened any more. But Luna had to open it one more time. Luckily, the door of the Ravenclaw common room was cheerful and liked to add to its tales. She slipped through with murmured thanks, and heard the count begin again behind her as she started towards the Headmistress's office.

As she walked, she expanded her senses beyond her head like a lion's mane, or a pair of ruffled and pricked ears. She could do this, now; it was new, but it was useful. She would use it to hear the voices of distant objects, and those which normally never spoke even to her

unless she directly asked them: the solid, sullen foundation stones, the tapestries whose tempers changed with every passing breeze, the lintels whose oldest grief was at being thought of merely as part of the doorways.

She was trying to hear the object that hated the whole world. It should be somewhere nearby. The other times she'd felt it, it was always in the Headmistress's office, and even if it moved, the way she thought it did, then it should leave some ripples of its passage behind, dark tales incised into the walls.

She was going to find it. The library tables had overheard Harry muttering to himself the other day about dangerous objects, and surely that was the most dangerous object in Hogwarts.

A stone complained when she stepped on it. Luna knelt, stroked it, and then rose and went on her way, feeling its contented purr roll along in the floor beneath her, sending other stones into a paroxysm of contentment. That made her walk a little more joyous than it might have been.

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"Sit down, Harry."

Harry took a seat in front of Snape's desk, keeping his eyebrows politely raised. His guardian's looks had sharpened today, away from the worry that he'd seen in Draco and towards anger. Harry was sure he must have made a mistake in Potions class or elsewhere to earn that fury, but try as he might, he could not remember it.

"Yes, sir?" he asked.

"How many times have I told you to call me by my first name?"

Harry cocked his head. Maybe that was my mistake? Snape had spoken to him in Potions class today, and Harry had responded with a "Yes, sir," but most of the time Snape didn't want his first name used in front of other students anyway. If Harry had thawed his

resentment, he might have felt it then, because Snape had given no sign that the name-use he expected of Harry had changed yet again.

But the resentment lay deep in the icepack at the back of his mind, so he said, "Sorry, Severus. What is it?"

Snape sat in silence for a few moments more, as if considering how best to phrase matters. Then he leaned forward and said, "Harry, I notice that you still have not undergone a breakdown of the kind I would have expected when you learned about Lucius Malfoy's betrayal."

Harry smiled proudly. Oh, that. Well, at least I can tell him he doesn't have to worry anymore. "No, I haven't," he agreed. "I've managed to change things, Severus. My reactions are my own to control now, and I'm no longer obsessing over my latest failure the way I used to do. Draco talked to me about the same thing. I've managed to do most of what people asked me to in the last few weeks." He heard a sturdy pride in his voice. After a moment's consideration, he dismissed it as a harmless emotion. It could stay there.

Snape's frown only deepened. "I can only guess, Harry, that your arrival at this unusual emotional state is achieved through use of Occlumency pools, again," he said, his voice heavy with disappointment. "I cannot permit that to continue. You will allow me to examine you with Legilimency and start up a slow process of leaking through those pools. If you think we cannot permit you to have a collapse about Lucius, still less can we permit the kind of complete breakdown that you had to go through in Woodhouse."

Well, I should have known that any unusual behavior would only worry him. He's never been one to believe in the first signs of my healing, unless he was the one who prompted them. Harry nodded, and leaned forward. "Of course, Severus. I know I'm not doing anything wrong, with Occlumency or otherwise, so you can look at my mind."

Snape blinked, obviously caught off-guard. That increased Harry's hope, a little. Snape was relying on past patterns of behavior to assume things were wrong. When he saw how different things really

were, he would have to admit that this time, the past patterns of behavior were completely destroyed.

Of course, Harry knew that Snape probably wouldn't like the image of the ice at the back of his mind that kept his emotions in stillness until he needed them. His particular prejudice against them would be that they were solid encrustations in Harry's mind, and Snape didn't like solid encrustations; he had distrusted Harry's box long before it caused trouble. Snape held to the old view of mental control, that an Occlumens had to embody his emotions in some fluid construct like wind or water, or else he would go mad. But Harry had encountered a book in the course of his reading about some way to get around Unassailable Curses that suggested that was not true. Solid images could work, as long as they were solid images that could change. Ice was ideal, since it could melt and flow into water, a fluid container, and freeze again to keep the emotions out of the way.

But Snape probably still wouldn't like it, even if Harry was able to show him that it worked. So Harry would just not show the ice-banks to him. He would go on for a few more months and demonstrate to Snape how well it worked, without a breakdown, so that he would have to admit his fears had been for nothing, the way he wouldn't do with only a few weeks' evidence.

And to reassure Snape that everything was fine, he intended to use another trick he'd learned from the book about Unassailable Curses. Once, wizards had believed that intense mental concentration on the condition that allowed one to break the Unassailable Curse—for example, thinking like a member of one particular family if the Curse said that only a member of that family could pass the barrier—would work. It hadn't, but the method those wizards worked out was useful to other arts of mental control. So Harry conjured up a curtain of normal emotions and floated it in front of the icepacks as Snape gently blew into his mind.

The Legilimency examined him quite thoroughly. Harry let him see the pools and all the normal areas of his mind, the great steel skeleton covered with budding leaves. The ice was at the very back of his thoughts, curled around the tree's roots, where Snape would only have expected to find unconscious impulses and half-formed

desires anyway. The screen of emotions gave the impression that that part of Harry's mind was absolutely normal, unfrozen, untainted.

The wind blew out again. Harry opened his eyes, and smiled into Snape's perplexed face.

"Do you see, Severus?" he asked, keeping himself from formality just in time. To him, "sir" was a more affectionate term of endearment than a first name. He called both his parents by their first names now. He might think of people however he liked, by surname or title or first name, but what he called them face-to-face was a different matter. If Snape had allowed the formal distance between them to persist, an expandable space that Harry could retreat into or come back from as he had need, then Harry thought he might have felt even closer to him than he did now. "I'm fine. I just managed to tell myself that I couldn't break down right now, that people needed me, and so I kept the balance."

And that was true. It was what had decided him on using the ice, which he'd already half-toyed with the idea of doing, but had given up when he realized that he'd need access to all his emotions during the month of April and the Walpurgis ritual. After that, though—well, Draco had been so upset, and Hawthorn had been so upset, and the Ministry was in flux and in chaos, and it would have been so easy to add to Snape's burdens, too, if Harry were not watching out for that. So he slid the emotions into the ice, and waited to tell people until they would have to admit how much more efficient this was, and that it worked for him. He could still retrieve the emotions whenever he liked. He wasn't the cold monster he'd been for the majority of his first two years at Hogwarts. But he was in control of them and how he expressed them.

He thought this perfectly fine.

"I had thought," Snape said at last, "that you were upset from the encounters with Lucius and your parents."

"Upset for Draco," said Harry truthfully. "Upset for Hawthorn. And I wish someone else could have healed Lily. But that didn't happen." He shrugged, and sat looking earnestly at Snape.

He supposed it might be that earnestness that worried Snape and Draco. He couldn't help it, though. His freezing of his emotions had cleared his mind wonderfully. He could think ahead now, and forestall hunger by seeing when he would need to eat, and forestall sleepiness by resting. And since he knew exactly when he needed to do certain things, he freed more time for unexpected crises. This was the way he needed to function, he thought, the way a leader would have to be able to: ready to deal with whatever arrived suddenly in his life, and able to keep the rest of his life foaming about, attending to others' needs.

"I have a potion," Snape said quietly, "that I planned to give you, Harry. It would have healed any gaping wounds left in your mind from your emotions. But now..." He cut himself off and shook his head. "It seems I was mistaken."

"You were," Harry agreed, with a small smile. "But pleasantly mistaken, which is unusual, and good when it happens."

In the end, Snape had to let him go. Harry hummed under his breath as he walked towards his bedroom. One Wizengamot Elder, Hollyshead, had already written back to him in disbelief, demanding how he could want to let wizards and witches who slept with nonhumans "evade their responsibility to the magical community." He listed several points about how wizards were dying out, and more of them should be marrying and having children with humans, not less. Few people would want to marry the half-human children of such unions.

Harry knew exactly how to answer that letter, thanks to the ice. Before the ice, it might have made him so upset that he couldn't think.

He wondered, for a moment, what would happen if months passed and he showed Snape and Draco how he had coped, and they still hated it, still insisted that he should feel every spontaneous emotion that came along.

Well, then I can show them I'm just following the lessons that Joseph taught me, he reasoned. He taught me to take some time for myself

and do what I wanted to do. And this is what I want to do, and it helps other people, and it doesn't hurt me. I don't see how they can really object.

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Luna arrived in the Headmistress's office and stood still for a moment, gazing around. It was late enough at night that the Headmistress had already retired to bed. Luna could see the gleam of her fire under the door on the other side of the room, and hear the soft clucks of the pieces of wood talking to each other, arguing good-naturedly about who had been the most interesting person to watch sleep in the bed.

No wards spoke at her arrival; the walls and the floors knew Luna, and they would get in the way of the wards and keep them from responding when it was necessary to let her slip by. Luna appreciated the gesture, and she thought Headmistress McGonagall would, too. She didn't deserve to be disturbed, not this late, when she had the problems of a massive school to take care of. And things always grew worse near the end of the year, Luna knew, even if she didn't quite understand why. Students kicked stairs more often, and threw books across the room. Padma had tried to explain that it had to do with exams. But Luna didn't think that could be it. One studied, and one got good marks—most of the time, if one was in Ravenclaw—or one didn't. Who would worry so much about it?

She stood in the center of the office and turned in a circle. It hadn't changed since the last time she saw it. Bookshelves stood along the walls, still communing busily with them; the Headmistress had moved them in only a little more than a year ago, and it took wizarding furniture a long time to become acclimated to a new position, let alone an entirely new room. Luna didn't dare think about Muggle furniture, which she had heard was shifted around almost from moment to moment, and without the use of magic, so that it often collided with numerous rugs and bricks. A perch sat in the middle of the room, and sang of the phoenix gone last year. The Headmistress's desk hulked, thick with locks and wards and its own importance. The Sword of Gryffindor hung in a glass case on the wall behind the desk, more dull and unresponsive than most of the others; Luna knew that happened with magical objects who had once seen a

life of excitement and service and were now relegated to museum pieces. It had taken forever for her to persuade her father that his little belt knife, with a hilt rumored to have been forged by Merlin himself, would much rather hang on his belt and be used to cut paper occasionally than stay above the mantle and never do anything.

But nothing in the room felt like an object that hated the whole world.

Luna shook her head slightly. She hadn't felt the object here all year. When she had felt it before, though, the night she had come to tell the Headmistress what the chairs said about Gilbert Rovenan, it had been unmistakable, a flare of dark loathing. But Luna hadn't known until she left the office that it was in the object itself. And then she thought the Headmistress knew about it and had attended to it.

She should have remembered that other people didn't listen, except for Harry, who sometimes listened to magical creatures. If you didn't have arms and legs, most wizards disregarded you.

She moved forward and began to examine the walls, running her fingers lightly over them, trying to find some hint of a crack or a seam where the object could be hiding, and trying to attract the walls' attention to talk about the present instead of the past. It wasn't easy. This was an old, proud room, and prone to ignoring people who weren't part of its history.

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Snape paced back and forth in his office, deep in thought. Part of him was adamant that he should have forced Harry to take the silver potion—the part that thought there was something off in the picture of Harry's mind. But his son was happy, and healthy, and mentally sound. He should have rejoiced in the news, not been sure that it meant something even more wrong.

A sharp knock sounded on his door. Snape turned, arrested. The person had knocked on the part of his door that had no wards, and only a few people in the school could see spells well enough to do that. He doubted Harry would have come back so soon, or that Minerva would be walking around Hogwarts this late at night.

"Come," he called, lowering the wards with a few waves of his wand.

Peter stepped into the room, his face haggard. Snape examined him in some concern. It was not a surprise that their Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher should be able to see his wards, of course, or use a charm that would make his face look normal to even determined observation. But Snape did not like the fact that Peter's face appeared to have increased to three times the number of shadows he'd last seen it covered in.

"I've tried to stave off the dreams by telling myself they're just images of a time long past, and they can't hurt me," Peter said, his voice raspy. "But I can't do it anymore. I need some Dreamless Sleep Potion, Severus. Please."

Snape nodded and went to his shelves without complaint. He would hardly refuse potion to someone who looked like that.

"What kind of dreams are these?" he asked over his shoulder as he blended the powder with water. He generally kept Dreamless Sleep in a powdered form, except for the supplies storied in Pomfrey's hospital wing. Dreamless Sleep was one of the few potions students would sneak into his offices to try and steal, otherwise. But few of them were good enough at Potions arithmetic to know exactly how much water and powder they needed to mix together, even if they did surpass his wards. "I know you were troubled by nightmares earlier in the year."

"These are nightmares, and worse than nightmares," Peter said. "They're—they feel like the meditations of another part of me, a part that never left Azkaban, and where the Dementors stayed for years longer than they really did. I sit in my cell, and relive my own happy memories, and get angrier and angrier. But this time, there's no phoenix web to break. There's just my rage and hatred against my former friends to stew in. I loathe it. It's terrible."

"You should hate them," Snape murmured, studying the level of liquid in the vial with a practiced eye. There, that will do. He carried the vial

back to Peter rather ceremoniously. "What they did to you was inexcusable."

"Not unless I decide it is," said Peter. He looked longingly at the potion, but did not swallow it immediately. He knew better; he would collapse on the floor of Snape's office. "They're a part of my life that's over and done with. Good night, Severus." He turned towards the door.

Perhaps it was the first name. Perhaps it was a real longing to know how the rat had accomplished it. Whatever it was made Snape call after Peter. "How did you do it, Pettigrew? That letting go of your hatred, your reversion into a simpler frame of mind?" He wasn't quite able to keep himself from sneering out the words, but he told himself he had a right to sound like that. This man had been one of his four tormentors in school, and then by all appearances a traitor to the Order of the Phoenix, one who had received only a bit more punishment than Snape for deeds far less laudable. Snape still did not really know him, or at least did not know this calm, patient man as a continuation of the bumbling, sycophantic boy.

Peter glanced back at him. "I asked myself what I would rather live for," he said simply. "Vengeance, or possibility. And the Sanctuary helped, too."

Snape curled his lip.

"I know that you don't think it did," Peter said. "Of course, I actually talked to a Seer at first, instead of simply suffering through the dreams. And, when I did, I came to realize that I blamed my friends less with every passing day. First, I was set on helping Harry, and if that involved bringing my friends and Dumbledore down, well, fine, but they weren't the reason I was doing it. And then I helped kill Sirius because he committed suicide with my wand, not because I wanted him dead. And then I went to the Sanctuary to heal, not primarily to hide from the Aurors. I made all those decisions with someone innocent or myself in mind, Severus, not an enemy. I think that's the problem with too many Dark wizards, really. You let your enemies rule your life."

“I know that you’re still bitter, Pettigrew,” said Snape stiffly, not liking the implied rebuke in Peter’s words. The Light-Declared rat would tell me how to live? “I’ve seen you show it.”

“Yes,” Peter said, “but it’s one emotion among many. It doesn’t control my life.” He lingered, eyes on Snape, saying without words whom it did control.

Snape narrowed his eyes. “Get out.”

Peter went.

Snape paced in a circle for a moment, then turned restlessly towards the door. He should patrol the dungeons anyway, a task that he never quite entrusted to the Slytherin prefects alone. And if his footsteps happened to carry him to Minerva’s door—well, she was one of the few people in the school whom he felt comfortable asking for advice. If she did not sleep yet, he would ask more of her.

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Luna was surprised, but not startled, when she felt the gargoyle leaping aside in obedience to a human voice. Of course someone might wish to visit the Headmistress now, and most people couldn’t simply sympathize with the gargoyle’s loneliness and ask it to move aside that way. There were a number of professors in the school who had the password.

Luna moved out of sight behind the Headmistress’s desk. The wards flickered out and then came back again, stronger, concealing her presence. The locks whispered welcomes to her in voices like little squirts of oil. Luna asked each of them about their tumblers, and listened intently. Perhaps a tumbler in a lock was the object that hated the whole world. But as each lock reported back, she had to give up the idea. No, they would know. Most objects knew the insides of themselves much better than wizards gave them credit for, even complicated ones like watches.

The door of the office opened. Luna looked up and saw Professor Snape coming through, his face set in a scowl. He glanced around, saw the empty and dark office, and hesitated.

And then the object that hated the whole world was there.

Luna opened her eyes wide, but stood still so that it wouldn't notice she'd noticed it. She didn't think this object realized she could listen, or it would have hated her more than anyone else. Instead, it spat passion like venom at Professor Snape, who didn't notice, of course.

No. Wait. It is not angry at him. It is angry at part of him.

That didn't really make sense. Luna had the impression like a hazy bar of shadow wavering away from a light source; it existed, but it wouldn't stay still, and it wouldn't let her get a good grip on it. And she couldn't poke her head out from around the desk to see what had changed, how the object had arrived, because then Professor Snape would see her, and she would get detention, and have to spend it hurting poor defenseless cauldrons by scrubbing them too hard with a wire brush, or drowning the stones in the entrance hall that didn't like to be drowned. Besides, she didn't think the object had suddenly scuttled into the room; Professor Snape would have seen it move and hit it with a spell. He was paranoid like that.

So she remained still, analyzing her impressions, trying to understand. She had to concentrate through the voices of locks and desk and stones and walls and bookshelves, and it reminded her of trying to understand why human things mattered; it was so hard.

Then Professor Snape turned and left again, obviously having decided against knocking on the Headmistress's bedroom door.

And the object that hated the whole world left, too.

Luna carefully put her head out from around the desk and looked about. Nothing had changed. When she asked the floors, nothing had come up through them. When she asked the ceiling, nothing had come down through it. When she asked the walls, they complained of

the weight of the bookshelves, but admitted nothing had crawled through them.

It was all very perplexing.

Luna left at last, because the moon-glass would be shining soon, and the office had no more tales to tell her. She asked the stones in the school to watch out for something crawling through them, though, or to tell her tales of abandoned rooms where powerful magical objects might lie. She wanted to help Harry. He listened, too.

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“Through the front door, sir?” Hope’s voice was low and tense with excitement.

Rufus nodded, and briefly gripped her shoulder. The Auror grinned at him, and then slipped around the side of the house. Rufus went back to studying it, the Apollonis estate, lying far too still and peaceful under the moonlight.

The Apollonis estate, and the home of the Liberator who had helped Harry against Falco Parkinson, if his speculations were correct. And certainly the home of a man who had had artifacts the Unspeakables had seized in his home.

Hope had brought him the evidence just that morning, waving it proudly around her head. Someone had misfiled the record and done all they could to prevent it from being found short of destroying it, but Hope had finally discovered it. Yes, there had been an Unspeakable raid on the home of Cupressus Apollonis years ago, and many magical artifacts had been carried away during it and taken to the Department of Mysteries. But one had been returned to its owner: a narrow coffin-like box, just big enough for an adult wizard or witch lying with arms folded to his or her chest. The box had preservation spells on it, ones that would keep the prisoner alive and breathing and fed and watered, and also prevent him or her from breaking out.

That’s the Liberator’s means of confinement, Rufus thought, exultation moving through him like oil as he read the paper. And a law

was passed a year later that made that kind of thing completely illegal for anyone to use on a human being. We have a reasonable enough suspicion to raid.

He had brought several Aurors with him, all Light-dedicated. Apollonis was fanatic enough that he was likely to have wards around his house that might destroy Dark or even undeclared wizards.

Hope was spreading around the back of the house, with Berrywise, and Percy shifted from foot to foot behind him like a small boy who had to go to the loo, and other pairs of Aurors were approaching from the sides. Rufus intended this to be a small enough raid that, if they really did find nothing—not that he thought they would—it wouldn't make headlines, or leave much evidence. They would step in quickly, arrest the bastard who'd been abusing his daughter, free the Liberator, and leave.

Rufus stamped his foot, and felt a savage grin break loose across his face as if in response to the movement. Merlin, this felt good, to be in the field again, to be doing something concrete, instead of having to negotiate with the Wizengamot through delicate mazes of influence that might change any moment, and might result in any one of them seeing him as under Harry's thumb. And thanks to Harry's bold, very nearly Gryffindor declaration of political war in favor of half-human children, the headache and the situation had both built to a slow boiling point. Any moment the cauldron would overflow, but there was no saying when.

He'd needed something like this to get him away from both the Wizengamot and Harry for a time.

He saw Hope's signal from the back of the house. She and Berrywise had examined the wards and found nothing they could not overcome, then.

Rufus nodded, and signaled back, waving his wand in a way that made an Augurey's call rise from it. Then he strode towards the front door, Percy tagging along at his heels.

There were wards on the front door, but most of them, as Rufus had surmised, were directed at Dark magic. He used Alohomora to attack the lock, and, when spells rose to protect it, used a special version of the Confounding Charm that old Head Auror Samara Deronda, who'd been killed in the First War, had developed to use on protective spells. The spells tried to deal with what seemed to them to be multiple unlocking charms, and in their dazzlement forgot about protecting the handle itself. Rufus worked through a few more minor wards, and flung the door open.

Cupressus Apollonis was waiting there to meet them.

Rufus leveled his wand at him. The old wizard's eyes widened a fraction, but otherwise his perfect, polished expression never faltered.

"What is the meaning of this, Minister?" he asked. "Why did you invade my home this late at night?"

Rufus suppressed the nasty impulse to ask if he would have been any more welcome if he'd raided during the day. "I have reason to believe that you're abusing one of your children, Apollonis," he said, and cast a time-delaying charm, then whispered the Manacle Curse. A pair of shackles formed in the air in front of him, gaping, awaiting Apollonis's wrists, but not darting forward quite yet. "A young daughter. You have a young daughter, don't you? Younger than Ignifer Pemberley?"

He had the satisfaction of seeing wounded pride touched to the quick in Apollonis's eyes, then. But he fought it well enough, and said, "In this house we do not speak her name. But I have a young daughter, yes. Candor. If you dare accuse me of abusing her—"

"We have reason to believe," said Rufus, as Hope and Berrywise entered through a side door, herding Apollonis's wife Artemis in front of them, "that you have shut her in a Confinement Box. We've received letters whose provenance matches this house too closely to be coincidence. Your daughter has used those letters to be a shining light on the blemish of your honor. And use of a Confinement Box on a human being is highly illegal, Apollonis, as you know."

The old bastard just stared at him, too shocked to utter a word. Rufus felt satisfaction slice him like a knife again.

“Mother? Father? What is it?”

Rufus turned. A young witch with tumbling golden curls, who looked about twenty-one years old, was entering from yet a third direction, escorted by two of his Aurors. She had blue eyes, not the yellow more common to Light pureblood families, but otherwise she looked much like Rufus had pictured her. She was certainly frightened enough.

“Candor Apollonis?” he asked.

Her gaze shot to him, and she nodded.

Rufus drew another breath. “The Liberator?”

And her face returned blackness.

Rufus frowned. She’s probably frightened that her parents will punish her. He shot a glance at Cupressus and Artemis, both of whom were standing quite still. “You can speak freely in front of them, Candor,” he said. “No one will hurt you.”

“You’re not here to take us to prison?” Candor’s voice was small.

“Of course not,” Rufus said. “We want to free you, and to insure that you realize you have a home and friends in the outside world. Your parents won’t be able to abuse you again, I promise.”

“They’ve never abused me,” said Candor, her eyes flying wide. “What are you talking about? What do you mean, freeing me? Who’s the Liberator?”

“If you had listened to me, Minister,” Cupressus Apollonis said, his voice low and ugly, “you would have had time to hear me say that I sold the Confinement Box six months after the outcast’s miserable departure from this house. I have not owned it for nearly as long as Candor has been alive.”

Rufus glanced back and forth between both of them. They are lying. One or both of them. They must be. I cannot—I cannot have made a mistake.

Hope caught his eye. Rufus nodded to her. “Will you agree to take Veritaserum?” he asked Cupressus.

The old bastard lifted his head proudly. “In the name of the Light, I have nothing to hide.”

A tense silence succeeded that announcement, while Hope fetched the vial of Veritaserum from her robe pocket and carefully placed three drops on Cupressus’s tongue. Candor said quietly that she wanted some, too, and so Hope crossed over and fed it to her. Rufus clenched his hand on his wand, and tried not to feel the wavering certainty behind every Auror’s eyes except for Percy and Hope.

“Have you ever abused your daughter Candor?” he asked Cupressus, when the usual test questions to establish known facts like name and location had passed.

“No.”

Rufus hissed between his teeth. “Have you ever locked any child of yours in a Confinement Box?”

“No. No Light parent would do such things to his children.”

“Have you ever tried to support the Order of the Phoenix? Or Falco Parkinson?”

Cupressus actually laughed at that one, despite the numbing effect of the drug. “No. Why would I want to?”

Rufus turned to Candor without answering. “Did you ever write me letters under the name of the Liberator?”

“No.” Candor’s eyes were wide, unfocused.

“Did you ever suffer any abuse at the hands of your parents? Father or mother?” Rufus glanced at the silent, watching, white-faced Artemis.

“No. Never.”

And that was it. That was over. He’d botched things. And badly.

Hope, nearly as pale as Artemis, caught his eye again, and mouthed Obliviate? Rufus considered it for a moment. He knew his failure would be all over the papers in a few days if he did not.

But his own morals made him hesitate. He’d Obliviated Wizengamot Elders into thinking they’d voted for him to assume absolute power during the Ritual of Cinnabrus, and he’d promised himself solemnly that that was as far as he would walk down that particular slippery road. Could he justify going farther now?

“Don’t worry about it, Minister,” said Cupressus, his voice icy, but full of absolute truth. “There are wards on this house which prevent me from forgetting anything which happens inside it. I promise you, no Memory Charm will work. The walls and the doors themselves would tell me if I forgot something so important.”

Rufus turned to face Cupressus, his heartbeat hollow and fast. The Light wizard’s yellow eyes were narrow, and the hatred in them was very terrible.

“I shall not forget this insult, Minister,” said Cupressus, the effects of Veritaserum already passing from his voice. “Never.”

Rufus inclined his head and wheeled around to leave, calling his Aurors to him with a lift of his hand. There was nothing else he could do. Berrywise let Artemis’s arms fall with a slightly lost expression, and the other Aurors who had been standing behind Candor followed him.

“What will we do now, sir?” Percy asked softly as they came out onto the lawn again, under the moonlight that no longer seemed as bright as it had just a few minutes before.

Rufus stared at the sky. He could hear Cupressus telling his wife he wanted to firecall someone in the moments before the door closed.

He sighed. "Go back to the Ministry. Put up with it." Suffer it, as I surely will have to when the news gets out.

Perhaps I should have left the Liberator's rescue up to the Liberator herself, as she begged me to do.

But the idea nagged at him. All the information they'd had access to fitted Apollonis so perfectly. If not him, then who?

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Aurora stirred up with a half-shout when her Floo connection opened. She'd fallen asleep in a chair in front of the fire, and her neck was sore and one arm asleep from her leaning on it. She shook it out now, and waited for a familiar face to appear, half-knowing it must be bad news. No one ever firecalled in the middle of the night for any other reason.

However, the face that formed in the fire was only vaguely familiar. Cupressus Apollonis.

Aurora stared for an impolite moment before she found her tongue, and knelt down to be more fairly on his level. "How may I help you, sir? It's an unexpected pleasure to have you contact me, but I fear, from the time, that nothing good has happened to you."

Cupressus gave her what was not a smile so much as a baring of teeth. Aurora knew it could not be directed at her, though. She had not stepped, even obliquely, on the interests of Apollonis. She waited.

"Madam Whitestag," Cupressus said after a few moments, "the Minister has...made a grave mistake with me and mine. And not so very long ago, Harry vates made his third grave mistake with me. The first was taking a child I have sired away. The second was accepting the support of families sworn to me. The third was publishing private correspondence. Now the Minister has made me lose what little faith I

still had in Harry's allies, and he said enough to convince me he was acting with the vates's support and cooperation." He paused.

"And?" Aurora prompted, hardly able to believe what this sounded like.

"I find myself much more minded to join the alliance that you and Elder Juniper are weaving between you." Cupressus fixed her with a direct stare. "There are particulars to be worked out. But not the fact of my allegiance."

Aurora caught her breath, and smiled. Sometimes, perhaps, good news does come in the middle of the night.

Interlude: The Liberator's Tenth Letter

June 1st, 1997

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I am so sorry, sir, that I wasn't able to give you the right combination of clues as to where I was! I heard about the raid on Cupressus Apollonis's house; my parents were so outraged that they talked about it in front of me. Of course, my father noticed I was listening and gave me one of his dark glares—he believes he must intimidate me at all times, and now he's even right about that, while before this a reminder or two was enough—but he wasn't that serious about it. They are worried. They think that the Ministry has turned against Light wizards, and they may be next on the list of raids or arrests, for all they know.

Since Cupressus Apollonis did not specify what he was accused of in the papers, except child abuse, I don't know what clue you might have followed to him. Please, though, sir, don't worry about me. I am very nearly ready to leave this place. I think I may have been able to figure out where the Ministry is from here, given memories of an Apparition I remember my mother taking me on when I was very young. If I'm right, then I'll go west when I leave the house. And after that—well, I have magic. I have a wand, though I've rarely been allowed to use it. And since I'm leaving forever, I'll risk breaking into the cage where my mother usually keeps it.

So many risks are changing me. I feel like Princess Black, with the whole world open before me. But instead of my husband dying, it's my fear that's perished.

I trust you, sir. I know I can come to you and you'll grant me sanctuary. I would be a little awkward going to Harry, and I don't know where Hogwarts lies anyway. But I'll send you another letter in a few days, when I'm ready to leave.

No more clues, though. Please, sir, don't embarrass yourself for me! Such risks could cost you your office. The wizarding world needs you

in power. Harry needs you in power. I need you in power. We all need you, so that we can survive the coming war.

A few days more, and all changes. I am so nervous, so excited, with my heart beating in my throat. A new spring is beginning for me, even though the world's spring is almost done.

Yours,

The Liberator.

Chapter Ninety: Learning to Relax

Draco leaned his elbows on the table and studied Harry through the corner of his eye. Harry was reading a letter that had come in by an official Ministry owl that morning, his face grave. Naturally, of course, most of the people at the Slytherin table were trying to see over his shoulder, including Millicent.

Draco wasn't. He was observing the way Harry's face changed instead, how his grave expression melted in a few moments. He tucked the letter into the pocket of his robe where he usually kept most correspondence, and nodded at nothing, and went back to eating.

"What was the letter about, Harry?" Millicent asked. Draco wondered if he ought to despise her for showing her eagerness like that, but he couldn't, not really. If she hadn't asked, someone else would have.

"What letter?" Harry raised his eyebrows.

Millicent laughed, and so did most of the other Slytherins, assuming that Harry was trying to make a joke. And a moment later he laughed with them, and shook his head, and said, "The Minister. Private business, I'm afraid. If it wasn't sensitive news, like the color of his pants, then be assured I'd tell you."

That won him another round of snickers, and Harry turned back to his breakfast, a half-smile lingering on his face that dropped off almost immediately.

It was a small incident. But it gave Draco another piece of the evidence he needed. And if it didn't set the hot anger boiling in him that the thestral incident had, it conjured an icy, needle-sharp anger, which seemed to go in through one of his ears. He sat back and controlled his breathing as best he could.

Harry, of course, even when suppressing his emotions the way Draco was now certain he was doing, was unfairly good at noticing other people's. "What's the matter, Draco? Did something fall into your breakfast?"

“No,” Draco breathed, eyes focused on the wall over Harry’s head. “It’s nothing for right now. Ask me later.”

Harry bit his lip, then nodded. Already his face had lost its look of concern. He touched the parchment in his pocket instead, and seemed to be thinking about whatever the Minister’s letter had said.

Draco sat back, and plotted his line of attack. He could move now, point out that Harry’s Occlumency, or whatever it was, was interfering with his daily life. It wasn’t much, but even a tiny lapse of attention could be enough to condemn them all if this happened in the middle of war.

Or he could wait for a few days, and then ask Harry for what he’d always planned to ask. He was going to be seventeen on the fifth of June, coming of age in the wizarding world. The gifts presented on a wizard’s or witch’s seventeenth birthday were traditionally some of the richest he or she would ever receive, so what Draco wanted from Harry wouldn’t be out of place.

Or he could do something else, so that he would know exactly how to phrase it when it came time for his birthday.

Draco decided on the third course of action after thinking about it for a short time. He and Harry had Defense Against the Dark Arts today, and Professor Pettigrew was mostly kind and understanding even to the students he caught sleeping in class. Draco wouldn’t pay for inattentiveness there the way he would in Transfiguration or Potions, or even Charms, where almost all their work was practical now.

Defense it is.

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Wherever he went that day, walking from class to class or sitting in the Great Hall or working on homework in their room during one of their free periods, Harry saw Scrimgeour’s words in the morning letter floating in front of him.

June 1st, 1997

Dear Harry:

I am sorry to have to ask this of you, especially when my own faults have added to the weight of your burden. But I must. If I do not, then we are risking political disaster now or very near in the future.

I will ask that you hold off on your campaign to make other wizards aware of half-human children and how common they may really be, under the glamours, or even under human skins that hold permanent Transfigurations. At the moment, this is throwing the Wizengamot off-balance, giving them another issue to consider when they are already fully occupied with the werewolves and with what they see as my incompetence and my favoring of Dark or undeclared wizards over Light. And it is leading to a paranoia that is linked to and feeding off the kind they feel for werewolves. Werewolves can be distinguished by certain subtle signs if they have borne the curse long enough, and there is always the ultimate test of locking them in a room on the full moon if one must know, but half-human children are savagely protected by their parents, and sometimes they may not even know they are half-human. They could be anyone around us. That has prompted the Wizengamot towards fears that anyone and anything—forgive the phrasing—could be an ally of yours, but look like an ally of theirs.

I do not say that you will never be able to win rights for half-human children. But it will need to wait until the issue with the werewolves is settled, which may be some time. Every emissary we have sent to the packs has returned with the message that they are only interested in listening to wizards who have sworn to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. This, understandably, is making the Wizengamot more upset.

I believe I made the mistake I did with Cupressus Apollonis because I wanted so badly to win a political victory, one that would prove my fitness to be Minister, which my enemies are now questioning, beyond a doubt. I slipped up through overtiredness and over-eagerness. No one can be perfect, of course, but a Minister must come as close to it as possible, and surely a vates cannot be far

behind. Please, Harry. I ask for more time both for my own sake, so that I may more fully acknowledge and repair my error, and for your own, so that you do not fall into the same trap I did.

Yours,

Rufus Scrimgeour.

Harry had to admit he would have been happier with a more definite date and time. “Someday” had been the one word that showed up the most often in correspondence with centaurs, with goblins, with werewolves, with nearly everyone in the magical world who was not a Light pureblood or halfblood. “Someday” the Ministry would alter the laws that forbade Muggleborn wizards and witches’ use of magic at home during the summer, even to save lives. “Someday” the werewolves would be acknowledged as full partners in human society, and “someday” the Wizengamot would consider certain cases that could have made the difference and set precedents. This was looking like another case of “someday.”

But it was not fair to put Scrimgeour on edge, either.

Worry and anger tried to rise, especially when he considered that he had made Scrimgeour’s situation worse without knowing it—and he should have known it, should have been able to study it. But he hadn’t, and now this had happened.

Harry shook his head a bit and drained the emotions off, locking them back into ice where they belonged. He absolutely must have a clear mind to deal with this, or anything he did would just worsen the situation again.

“Perhaps you would like to come up to the front of the classroom, vates, and practice your Transfiguration skill on this chair?” Henrietta’s sharp tone let him know that she’d noticed the headshake.

Harry produced wry amusement in himself and rose to his feet, coming forward. He had to change the chair into a fly—hard on almost all levels, since it was not only the Transfiguration of a nonliving object into a living one, but a considerable difference in size.

And almost none of the students actually knew what a fly looked like, how the legs and jaws bent, at least until Henrietta made them sit down, use magnification spells, and study the results. Harry hoped that he remembered just how the mandibles fitted together, how the wings were supposed to align over the back, and what the buzzing noise it made when it flew was like.

He faced the chair, and though he intoned the incantation Henrietta had given them aloud, he was forcing his magic through different channels, above and beyond the spell. He wanted to change this chair into a fly. He made that the goal of his desire, and sent all his focus towards that.

Halfway through the spell, he realized he was thinking about how to answer Scrimgeour's letter again.

And then he realized that he'd frozen the determination he needed to send the magic to one place, changing it back into ice, and leaving a great deal of loose, unfettered power hanging about in the classroom. The power darted in random directions, great wheels of yellow-green lightning that were not deadly until they touched something, Harry thought, but which he couldn't rein in yet.

He hesitated, trying to decide which emotion would be best to deal with this, trying to unfreeze and unlock it.

"Vinculi!"

Henrietta's magic swept through the room a moment behind the Imprisonment Hex, jumping like a well-trained dog to capture Harry's magic in its mouth. She was nearly as strong as Snape, and the Imprisonment Hex had been designed to allow a much weaker wizard to contain powerful magic, as long as it didn't have a directing will behind it. In a moment, Harry's dancing pinwheels slowed, and then bumped together until they coalesced into a yellow-green fog. Henrietta waved her wand, never taking her eyes from Harry, until he was able to hold out a hand and call the loose magic back to him. He could feel his cheeks flaming; a small leak had burst from the ice at the top of his packed emotions, and embarrassment had trickled out.

“Class is dismissed,” Henrietta said.

There was a wave of wondering half-protests; Professor Belluspersona had never dismissed class for a magical accident, and even when Peeves got loose in the room, she had only marched them into another and begun again. This time was different, though. Harry knew it from the way her eyes focused on him.

“Dismissed, I said,” said Henrietta, and then people began standing, picking up papers and books and turning towards the door, not willing to stay near their intimidating professor if she actually wanted them gone. “Except for you, vates,” said Henrietta, in a tone that made Harry stand right where he was, his head lowered. “But that does include you, Mr. Malfoy.”

Harry glanced up. Draco was lingering near the first row of seats, staring at him with an expression somewhere between betrayal and disgust. Harry looked away again, and then Draco was gone, striding out of the room with quick, sharp movements. The door shut behind him with an expressive bang.

“Now,” Henrietta said into the silence, “I have only seen a wizard lose control like that when someone else cast a curse that suppresses the will at him. Imperio, I might say, and you could lose your will.” Harry cringed, and took a moment to realize she had not actually cast the spell. Henrietta’s face remained blank. “Or you might have done it if something suddenly distracted your attention. But no, a mere distraction would not have let the magic go that formless. It would have wavered, and the chair would have changed into something, even if it was only a rabbit. I want to know what happened, Harry, and I want to know right now.”

Harry wondered if Henrietta was simply that good at scolding, or if it came from the fact that he’d never really suffered an admonishment from her before that he had to take seriously. Botching a spell in Transfiguration was one thing; he could study and learn how to improve, and he hadn’t botched much since he started learning the right way to use Lord-level magic, around and outside the spells. But this—she sounded as if he had done something that hurt or offended her personally.

And the ice wasn't working anymore. Already, some had melted to release more emotions into his thoughts, shame among them.

Quietly, Harry told her about the Occlumency techniques he'd learned from the book on Unassailable Curses, how they weren't supposed to be dangerous unless one never unfroze the ice, and how he'd assumed that everything was working well. He kept his eyes focused on the far wall. He didn't quite dare to meet her gaze, which was judging in a way that he'd only felt from Millicent before. This was one of the few times when Henrietta really had seemed like Adalrico's second cousin.

Henrietta stood when his recitation finished and walked across the room, studying one of the pile of books she'd brought with her that morning. Then she fetched it and came back to him. Blinking, unsure, Harry accepted it. Why would she be carrying an Occlumency book to a Transfiguration class?

He understood when he looked at it. It wasn't an Occlumency book at all. The cover showed a witch who looked rather like Professor Trelawney, except intelligent, holding a mirror in which was reflected a witch holding a mirror, and then a smaller one, and then another, and so on. The title proclaimed it *The Changes of the Mind*.

"I began to study this when I became interested in mental Transfiguration," Henrietta said, voice almost without inflection. "It is still a new art, but it is bound closely to Occlumency and the other mental areas of control, to the actual changing of a target's mind. And there are chapters that discuss exactly what may happen when someone tries to change his or her mind after years of abuse or torture. The author is from Africa. They deal with their victims of war and abuse more rationally there, I have heard."

She tapped the book. "If I am not mistaken, the page you want is 238."

I don't think she's mistaken, Harry thought, as he flipped the book open. Henrietta's memory was prodigious; she had astounded her students before by being able to remember who had had trouble with

what spell back at the beginning of the year, never mind just a week ago.

Page 238 began in the middle of a dense paragraph. Harry skimmed it, and found what he assumed Henrietta wanted him to see at the start of the next one.

One must be careful with some of the more unusual Occlumency techniques—for example, the use of ice, or of the Circling Gyre—in people who have suffered mental and emotional abuse. Such abuse often includes the suppressing of emotions. It is enough to create an addiction to their suppression when a victim is also trained in Occlumency. Fluid containers and the usual practices still work well with them, but they can and will seize opportunities with the less common techniques to push their emotions ever further away. And this can be disastrous, because unusual techniques require close attention, not simple use, for up to a year, until the Occlumens has truly mastered them.

Harry lowered his eyes. “I honestly didn’t know that,” he said.

“I know you didn’t,” said Henrietta, and took the book away from him. “That’s the only reason I’m not escorting you to the hospital wing now, or to St. Mungo’s.” She studied him for a moment more. “Am I right in saying that this is the first time that’s happened? What technique were you using?”

“Ice,” Harry said. “And yes. The determination slipped away in the middle of my casting the spell.” He stared blankly at the chair he should have turned into a fly. He thought of what would have happened had it been a charging Evan Rosier, and shivered.

He heard a rustle of robes. Surprised, he turned back to find Henrietta kneeling in front of him. She was so tall that even on one knee, her eyes were still almost level with his. She grasped his chin and tilted it up.

“If you were anyone else, then perhaps you could train in such techniques and use them to help instead of entrap yourself,” said

Henrietta calmly. "As it is, you will not have the time. You must unfreeze the ice, Harry."

Harry hesitated for a moment.

"I am not going to compromise on this," Henrietta said, misinterpreting his silence. "Or I will tell Snape. I love you as my leader, Harry, but I will not protect you when I think you are doing something stupid." She gave a sharp, shark's smile. "Even your Unbreakable Vows could not guarantee you a tame Slytherin, you know."

"It's not that," said Harry. "I wanted to ask if you would accept a vow from me. Since you're under vows yourself—" he held Henrietta's eyes for a moment more, to acknowledge what lay between them—"I can think of no better oathkeeper. Snape and Draco will yell at me, and they'll be right to do so. But they would not believe a promise at this point, and they wouldn't punish me in the ways they would need to even if I broke it. I know that you can believe it, and you will punish me if need be."

Henrietta's eyes had brightened, the way they always did when he paid sustained attention to her. Harry sucked in a breath through his nose, and reminded himself that he had made her this way. If that caused him unease now, well, so be it. He ought to feel unease when reminded of what he had bound Henrietta to.

"What is the vow, Harry?" she asked. "And what consequences are acceptable?"

"If I do this again," said Harry, "and by this I mean the suppression of emotions, not the use of Occlumency, in any form, then you have my permission to cast pain curses at me. I won't fight back."

"How many pain curses?"

"Five."

Henrietta nodded. Her expression had gone almost dreamy now. Harry wondered if anyone else in the Alliance could have stood in the

room with her and not been disgusted. But she and he understood the bargain, and that was all that really mattered. His dealing with Henrietta had always had a different footing than his dealings with anyone else in the Alliance.

“Make the vow, Harry. I want to hear it in a non-conditional form.” Henrietta’s hand tightened on his chin.

“I swear never to suppress my emotions in such a fashion again,” Harry said steadily. “Not with unusual Occlumency techniques, not with usual ones, not with spells or potions. The consequences of breaking this vow are five pain curses to be cast by Henrietta Bulstrode, and which I will not defend against.” He felt he should use her real name for a promise as solemn as this, and he could not imagine that someone was listening outside the door; Henrietta’s wards would have caught them.

He threw the force of his magic behind the words, and though they did not bind the way an Unbreakable Vow would have, he felt them settle around him, a steel cage. Harry took a deep breath and shook his head. I ought to be able to give an ordinary promise and mean it, but I’ve tried that and it doesn’t work. So we’ll try this. Needs must. What I did was stupid, but I thought it would work. I don’t think this is stupid. Time will tell if it is.

Henrietta released him at last, and moved away. “You’ll come to me at once if you need help or a reminder, Harry?” she asked in a clear voice.

Harry nodded. The grip of the promise was still tight on him, rubbing like iron bars along his ribs. It felt more comfortable than he would have suspected. Well, why not? I agreed to it of my own free will. And I know what happens if I break it. It’s like the vow I swore to help the werewolves. You can’t really argue with your blood turning to silver in your veins.

“Now, go to your next class.”

Harry nodded to her. “Thank you,” he said.

“Don’t let it happen again, in my class or any other. That will be my thanks.”

Harry gathered his books and left the room. He met Draco waiting down the hall, but Draco immediately straightened up and tried to pretend he had only been lounging there by coincidence. Harry gave him a small smile.

In the back of his mind, he imagined a sun, shining with all the fierce determination he’d lost when the focus of his mind changed from the Transfiguration. The icepacks began, slowly and steadily, to melt.

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Draco did as he had promised himself, sitting carefully back in his seat in Defense while Professor Pettigrew gave a dire warning about the theory that would occupy most of the exam. He didn’t need to worry about that. He knew most of what they’d studied this year already, thanks to books from the Malfoy library, practice in the dueling club with Harry, and research he’d done for other classes.

Now, what he needed to do was look into Harry’s mind and see how he was repressing his emotions.

He was now sure that it was happening, given the incident in Transfiguration (and what had Harry been thinking? True, undirected magic really couldn’t hurt anyone the way a curse with force and will behind it would, but it could have had any number of random and embarrassing effects). He didn’t know what to make of the small smile Harry had given him as they walked to Defense Against the Dark Arts together, or the fact that Harry had more emotion in his voice when he answered Pettigrew’s questions than he had seemed to have in the last few weeks.

He was determined to find out, though.

His possession had grown stronger and suppler the more he used it, rather like a muscle being exercised. And Harry’s mind had been familiar to him since the very earliest days of its use, when he had let Draco possess him to learn. Now, Draco easily drifted past Harry’s

shields and into the back of his mind, looking for a sign of suppressed emotion or a mind teetering on the edge of madness.

He saw ice.

He saw the sun melting the ice, and as it trickled free and broke back into water, sensations of emotions came with it, ones that Draco recognized from the time when he'd still had empathy. Cold winds of shock, the heat and pressure of anger, the purling sunlight of pleasure, the prickling claws of irritation, were running into the soup of Harry's mind and adding their living presence to what had been far too much calm, ordered blankness.

Draco felt his own stunned surprise, and, a moment later, felt Harry's awareness of him.

Harry didn't try to force him out of his head. And why should he have? Draco asked himself a moment later. He had done nothing wrong. Or, rather, Harry had done something wrong, by freezing his emotions, which meant that Draco's small sin of transgressing the boundaries between their minds was really not a sin after all, only the measure he had to take to be sure Harry was all right.

Harry felt that justification, too, and tolerated it. He showed Draco more and more images of ice melting, the sun blazing, his mind growing thicker and stronger with the addition of the emotions. He showed Draco, without words, the promise he had made Henrietta Bulstrode, deliberately thinking of the images and the vow.

Draco didn't think there were any circumstances under which he would have allowed Henrietta Bulstrode to throw five pain curses at him. But if anyone did deserve them for all the trouble and pain he'd put others through by suppressing his emotions after he'd promised not to do it anymore, then it was Harry.

He drifted back into his own body, and opened his eyes, and waited until Harry turned to look at him. Harry did so, his eyes calm as they met Draco's own. He knew what he had done, and he was sorry for it. Draco could yell if he wished, but that wouldn't change Harry's mind substantially. He was already slowly reintegrating his feelings—the

best way to do it, so that he wouldn't have a breakdown like the one he'd had in Woodhouse—and had promised not to do it again.

This time, Draco thought the promise might hold.

He leaned back, and gave Harry a little nod, and decided to rework his notion of what he would like for his birthday.

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Harry chewed the base of his quill, and carefully arranged phrases in his head. He had quite a bit of correspondence to write that evening, both to Scrimgeour and to the parents of children like Jacinth, warning them why their struggle might take a little longer. He thought most of them would be reasonable. If the choice was between fighting now and helping to oust a sympathetic Minister, or waiting and giving that Minister a chance to find his feet again, Harry knew which he'd choose, and which Lazuli Yaxley would choose, and which most of the people who had been in contact with them so far would choose.

He simply needed to avoid "someday."

"That's another thing you didn't do when your emotions were frozen."

"Hmmm?" Harry glanced around at Draco, not sure what he meant.

"Chew on your quill." Draco watched him with an expression of satisfaction as supreme as if he, and not Henrietta, had been the one to show Harry the truth. "Just like fidgeting in place, or daydreaming. Your mind was so clean and inhuman that you didn't do the little things that make you human."

Harry nodded. "I know."

"Why did you lock your emotions up this time, Harry?" Draco leaned forward. "I think I've heard all your other justifications, but not this one."

Harry set the parchment and quill aside for a moment so that he could totally focus on Draco. "I'd been considering it for a while," he

began. "And now, of course, after that passage Henrietta showed me, I recognize that as an excuse for what I wanted to do anyway. After Lucius, I didn't want to suffer my own pain while I helped you through your own, or Hawthorn through hers. And when I went to heal Lily, I warded myself so entirely that almost no emotion got through. It seemed best to adopt a variation of that, once I left her cell."

"Seemed best." Draco shook his head. "I think you're the only person in the world who would believe that, Harry."

"Yes, well." Harry thought about that, then plowed through the next words. "I'm always going to have scars from my abuse, Draco. I think my mistake this time was assuming they were so healed that my new desire to suppress my emotions couldn't possibly have anything to do with my other attempts to do so. It did, and I should have realized that. If I keep in mind that the past happened, instead of putting it away, then maybe I do stand a chance of realizing this when it next tries to happen."

"You promised that you wouldn't suppress your emotions any more." Draco had a line between his brows.

"That, I did," said Harry. "But that's one specific action. There are other things I could do that might be just as damaging, and would be a result of my wanting to escape fully feeling, and which wouldn't violate the spirit of the vow I made to Henrietta." He squeezed Draco's hand. "That's why I rely on you and Snape to speak to me when you notice something odd about me."

"It's bloody frustrating when you keep insisting that nothing is wrong," Draco grumbled.

"I know," said Harry, and leaned in to kiss his cheek. "I know that I'm bloody frustrating, and the fact that you love me anyway says an awful lot about you, Draco. And about Professor Snape. And about Connor." He serenely ignored the face Draco made at the comparison to his brother. "Maybe it will be better now that I'm going to try to think about the past, and wonder if a new action that sounds absolutely wonderful to me has a connection to the past."

That decision hadn't been easy. He'd faced it early this afternoon and forced himself through it. He couldn't undo the past, couldn't make what had happened to him solely a source of strength any more than he could make the centuries house elves had spent under wizards' webs into a learning experience. They had happened, and though his own experience had been of significantly less duration and significantly less damaging than the elves', it was as unchangeable. What Harry could do was watch for its echoes rebounding into the future and close them off when possible.

So my parents aren't strangers to me. I'll never visit them, never see them again, won't give them a second chance to establish a relationship with me, but I can't pretend they never existed. And the fact that I was—abused—he still disliked the word—happened. And not all the effects it had on me are positive. I'll just have to think about that, integrate it in with all the rest.

Maybe that was what had been hardest. At one point, during the months when he'd talked with Joseph especially, Harry had come to think he would reach a time when he could integrate all aspects of his present life and past, including his vates work and his relationships with Draco and Snape and his bond with Connor and his politics and his battle with Voldemort and his memories, and be at peace. And now, every time he thought the integration was complete, there was another shard to be added. He didn't think the peace of completion would ever come.

Well, of course not, he thought, and the emotion behind this thought was a gentle, wry self-deprecation he hadn't felt in a while. It would be too simple otherwise. And I'm not destined to lead a simple life.

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Rufus stretched his arms until they cracked. Then he sipped the last of his tea. Then he signed his name to several small requests for funding that were usual in the Ministry, down to the regularity with which they arrived on his desk.

The whole time, Harry's letter sat in the middle of the desk, and mocked him.

Rufus would have laughed at himself for being afraid of an envelope and parchment, but he had seen what they could carry. It was a piece of parchment, and no official announcement, that had authorized the Aurors to use Unforgivable Curses for a short time during the First War. It was a letter that had told Rufus he was now Head of the Auror Office. It was a newspaper article, an unpublished one even, that had prompted this latest crisis with the werewolves.

But no one was in the office with him, and he did need to know what news Harry had sent in response to his request to delay for a short time on fighting for the rights of half-human children. He slit the envelope open, slowly, and as slowly drew out the letter folded inside.

June 1st, 1997

Dear Minister:

I agree that with the rest of the wizarding world boiling right now, I may have chosen the wrong time to press forward with this campaign.

Rufus closed his eyes tightly, and tried to prevent tears from falling, which told him, once again, how overtired he was, how much he had needed to hear some news like this. Then he let out a long, slow breath and continued reading.

I have sent letters to my allies telling them the truth: that I feel moving right now will cost us an ally and win us no friends. It is up to them to accept this or not. Some may choose to act without me, bringing petitions or challenging the laws. But I think most of them will agree to stay quiet. They know how vital a friendly Minister is to the success of this particular fight. Unlike the centaurs, whose choice it is to live without the wizarding world or within it, these allies of mine all have human parents, or at least human relatives. They wish to be able to stay in our world. They would also like to show their faces freely, that's all.

Distance yourself from me in public and in the Wizengamot, if you must. I ask only that you do not turn "someday" into "never."

Sincerely,

Harry vates.

Rufus sighed. He felt as if he had lived through a bad dream, believing it to be reality, only to wake and find out it was only a dream after all, and he could put those concerns away.

Then his mouth worked up into a smirk he could feel. If anyone had been in the office besides him, he felt sure they would have been flinching, or asking questions.

As it was, now that he had the time and freedom to maneuver, he knew exactly where and how to hit Juniper's groundswell of support in the Wizengamot. The Elders were clinging to Juniper not because he was their only choice, but because he was the one who was saying what they wanted to hear, and he had a fallow political reputation, vaguely good in many people's eyes, not prominent. Now that he was finally choosing to move, their impression was one of power on the rise, having gathered itself by its long dormancy.

Rufus intended to show them that his power, the active and real one, the one present on stage during the great events of the last few years, was the one that would truly rise in a wave, and knock Juniper and his supporters off their feet.

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It was done.

Indigena glanced around in satisfaction. The last wards were set on her Lord's new home. Spells would twang an alarm if anyone approached within a mile who was not loyal to Lord Voldemort. It had taken Indigena quite some time to figure out how to hook the wards to true thoughts, and not to something physical like the presence of a Dark Mark on one's arm, but she had found a way at last.

She looked once more at where her Lord was resting, and shook her head. Falco, might he be the playing of the wild Dark for the next century, had done a good job carving this place, at least. Tunnels

connected three large chambers, one meant as a throne room—currently the resting room—of Voldemort, one meant as a meeting place, and one that Indigena thought would work well for torture, given all the channels carved in the floor to carry liquid. Packed earth made all of those, though her tendrils had found every small hole in the dirt already.

Other, smaller rooms would hold prisoners, or work as bedrooms. Indigena had already claimed one of them for her own.

The wards twanged.

Indigena spun and stretched out her arms. Her plants surged up around her, vines running through her hair and plunging into the ceiling, walls splitting apart as her roots urged them to the sides, the rose around her left wrist rearing and ready to spit its deadly poison. Together, they dragged her straight through the roof of the burrow and out into the open light. Indigena rose, circled past the remains of a shattered wall, and leaped over other chunks of rubble to stand facing the east, where the disturbance had come from.

She saw what it was soon enough. He approached openly, not trying to conceal himself. Indigena gripped her wand tightly, though she had to admit not even a barrier of thorns would have kept her entirely free from fear, given the madness in his dark eyes.

“Why are you here, Evan?” she asked.

“To look,” Evan Rosier said, folding his arms. “To see the place where you tried to put a cage around me.”

Indigena raised her eyebrows. His madness has advanced. “That was near the Riddle house, Evan,” she said gently. “This is my Lord’s new lair.” She moved her wand in an absent circular motion, wondering if she could begin the golden bridle spell without Evan noticing. Her Lord, for whatever reason, wanted the madman among his hands and feet. They would have to bind him somehow.

"I used the wrong verb tense," said Evan, and laughed at her. Indigena thought it was the kind of laughter a rabid dog would issue, could it do so. "I have a habit of doing that."

He leaned nearer, his face friendly and full of cheer. "You should have killed me the first time you met me," he said. "It would have saved you a good deal of trouble."

Indigena cast the first binding curse, but Evan had already leaped. Never mind that the wards were supposed to prevent Apparition away from her Lord's sanctuary unless Voldemort had given his permission to that person. This was Evan. His magic largely did what it wanted, and always had.

She stood there, shaking, and closed her eyes. She would not let one man who made it his business to unsettle people unsettle her.

A few more days. A few more days, and then you can move. That will rid you of some of this nervous energy.

In the meantime, she would garden. That always relaxed her.

Chapter Ninety-One: The Old Light

Rufus had made sure he slept well. His mind was as clear as it was likely to become. He had talked with Percy quietly as they went to Courtroom Ten, not about what had happened the last time they were there, Unbreakable Vows and Unspeakables and the Ritual of Cinnabrus, but about the progress of his training. Percy, though inclined to squint at him at first as if he thought there must be something wrong for the Minister to take an interest in an Auror trainee, was describing it with enthusiasm now.

“And then they said that the trainees who had a difficult time lying down behind the walls and casting curses could get up, because it was their turn now—”

Gryffindor. Pure Gryffindor, every inch of him. It didn't surprise Rufus a bit that Percy preferred being in battle and casting curses to lying down behind a wall and doing so in safety. He might change his mind if he were ever in a real battle, since the walls would keep not only him but the comrades he would care about safe.

And then Rufus remembered that Percy had already been in a battle, the one in the Ministry two years ago where he had stepped in front of a curse to save Rufus's life.

Well, I was wrong, then. Pure Gryffindor, plain and simple.

The Aurors waiting as guards on Courtroom Ten opened the door for them. Rufus could see their slightly wary gazes. They were weighing him, trying to decide how much gravity he had this morning, how much force to pull the rest of the Wizengamot towards him. Since the mistake with Cupressus Apollonis, a few of the Aurors who had more political ambitions than the rest were beginning to distance themselves from him. Personal loyalty could not stand against loyalty to family for most purebloods and even halfbloods, as Rufus had reason to know.

He smiled at them. “Good morning, gentlemen,” he said crisply. “A good day for the Light.” And he strode past them, not even his bad leg troubling him much this morning. He'd soaked it last night in a

long bath full of the potions that the Healer he'd seen sixteen years ago, just after he received the wound, recommended. He didn't usually do it because it took three hours to bring a little relief, and besides, the wound was a badge of honor. But for today, when he wanted to look as though he controlled the British wizarding world—as he still did, as they hadn't yet said he didn't—he'd bathed it to make sure he would have no trouble walking.

A tide of speculation was already rising behind him, then, and he added to it when he appeared in the gallery of Courtroom Ten and walked to his place beside Griselda Marchbanks. Usually, Rufus had waited in the bottom of the chamber, near the place where prisoners sat, to escort the werewolves who spoke to the Wizengamot in. Most of the Elders were only willing to hear them if they had a guarantee of their good behavior from the Minister himself.

Now there were no more petitioners to be heard from. The Wizengamot was going to put the werewolf crisis to a vote today, if Rufus had anything to say about it, or at least make sure that this did not continue for much longer. He needed either enough Elders to secure the vote or enough to make sure his coalition did not crumble between now and the next session.

So he took his place among them again, as an equal, and he could tell it affected them, to see his confident stride and set face. He took the seat next to Griselda, and nodded to her and a few other Elders who regularly followed her, but let his gaze skim coolly over everyone else. He could feel Percy, who'd followed him in to serve as an attendant and secretary if necessary, holding in exultant laughter.

"Good morning, Rufus," Griselda said, her voice so soft that even magnifying charms would have had a difficult time bringing it to anyone else's ears. "What has cheered you up so efficiently?"

"Good morning, Griselda," Rufus returned. "You'll see in a short while, when everyone else does."

She sat back in her chair and looked thoughtfully at him. Rufus knew she was wondering at his refusal to tell her ahead of time. Besides

being the friend of the southern goblins, she was his friend in her own right. Why would he want to keep a secret from his closest allies?

Because nothing must be allowed to go wrong, old friend, Rufus thought, while he sat back and kept his gaze as smooth and assessing as a hawk's. You would probably be able to look surprised when I told you about Harry's letter, but I will not take the chance. The expression of surprise must be genuine, and if someone asks you later whether you knew what I was going to say, you must be able to say no.

Today, we begin on a new footing. And there might be a few even of my friends reluctant to follow me onto the ground I'll propose. Well. That is as it must be. But in that case, I will not give them special consideration.

He watched the last few Elders come into the room. Some of them were exchanging looks and mutters with each other that were probably the results of growing coalitions, or small, fragile alliances against Juniper. Rufus found himself more and more amused as moments passed, and Juniper still did not appear. It was unlikely that he would be late this day of all days. He would wait until the moment the meeting was supposed to begin, and then arrive, drawing all eyes to him.

And sure enough, that was what he did. He came in clad in a dark cloak that wrapped his robes so closely one would have thought it was December instead of June. Rufus had made a private bet with himself that Juniper would wear special robes for this special occasion. He wondered if he were right.

Juniper handed the cloak to one of the Aurors waiting next to the door, who didn't look as if he relished being made into a house elf, but could hardly protest a gesture like that from an Elder of the Wizengamot. Then he strode into the middle of the gallery towards his seat, which was just a bit left of center, his chin uplifted.

Rufus nodded slowly. Juniper's robes were red, with a golden bird imprinted on them in the colors of wavering flame. It was not a phoenix, as the stylized flames around it showed, but a firebird, a

much older symbol. The firebird had longer legs, and its specialty was its dance, as the phoenix's was its song. Once, in the darker ages when there were no Ministries and records were uncertain, Light wizards bearing the firebird symbol had been the ones who preserved history, the ones who defended the defenseless, the ones who fought back Dark wizards who would have made slaves of both Muggles and their own kind.

It was really no surprise that Juniper was choosing to ally himself with that tradition. In his own eyes, he was the continuation of that tradition, one of the few wizards who cared about what happened to the world he'd grown up in, and which he still valued.

Rufus had studied some history of his own, though. He knew there had been Dark wizards in the ranks of the firebirds. He knew that one way the Light wizards had finally settled the slavery disputes was by binding magical creatures to do the work instead. It was suspected that that was the reason house elves had been bound, though details on their webs were sketchy.

The firebird stood for Light, for grace, for an old and proud set of customs that worked at making the wizarding world better. It also stood for exclusion, for cutting out, for oppression of others as long as those others weren't part of the group the firebird wizards had sworn to protect.

It stood for sacrifice.

Rufus had spent enough time cleaning up the mess that sacrificial ethics had made of the wizarding world. He wasn't about to let it start again.

He rose and extended his hands with a slight bow. Juniper, who had opened his mouth to make an announcement, turned to face him with a small blink.

Rufus caught his eyes, and let his own opposition and pride and merriment shine forth.

Juniper's head lowered slightly, and his face darkened. Rufus made his smile just this shade of mocking, and then turned to face the rest of the Wizengamot.

"Wizards and witches of the Wizengamot," he said, "gentlemen and ladies of the British wizarding world." He turned his gaze back and forth, regular as clockwork, making sure to encompass them all. "We have heard a great deal about tradition in the arguments set forth in the last few days. We have heard that it is tradition to make sure werewolves cannot harm others, instead of good sense. We have heard it is tradition to keep our world secret from the Muggles, while forgetting the historical pressures that led to the decision. And we have heard that the core of our world is humanity for a very good reason: because it is tradition. I see that Elder Juniper has come today wearing another nod to the old allegiances.

"I am here today to tell you that our traditions are fossilized, and have not dealt well enough with the vast changes our world has undergone in the last few years. Law, history, custom—all those are good things to keep in mind. But we must also be mindful of the new, and able to face challenges we have never met before. All laws, all incidents of history, all customs, were new at one point in time. And now it is our turn to make new ones that our descendants will follow."

He saw faces brighten across the gallery. They were willing to listen, if he could only convince them that he was worth listening to. And he would. He had promised himself he would, and his conviction throbbed in his voice. If he could sound convincing, then at least some of them would be more open to his proposal, whether or not they chose to follow it in the end.

He caught Juniper's eye, and thus saw the almighty scowl the man was throwing him. Rufus smiled sweetly back, and swept into the second phase of his speech.

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Narcissa appeared, and staggered. She had visualized the desolate heath properly, but not the exact section of slope where she had Apparated. She caught herself and turned, wand out, ready to defend

herself against a series of wards or a guardian beast. She was almost sure that she would have to, given where she was.

But the bleak country around her remained silent, without even a trace of singing birds. The sun tried to catch on the withered grass and rough hill-slopes, but there was nothing to attract its reflection or make it want to shine. Narcissa shook her head and lowered her wand. She did not put it away. That would be foolish, considering where she was.

She turned again, and the house was behind her, looking remarkably similar to the old picture she'd found.

She moved a step forward, and then paused as conflicting emotions filled her. They could hardly help but be conflicting. Her husband was in that house, and the last time Narcissa had seen him, she would have lived perfectly well if his magic had been drained from him.

Now, though, nearly a month had passed, and he had not ventured out of the house or made any other stir. And Narcissa had discerned for herself where he must be, remembering the estate he'd once spoken of which his ancestors had warded so that only one of the oldest living generation of Malfoys could enter it.

And—well. Draco would have been horrified to hear this, but her relationship with Lucius was different, family pride or no family pride. He had disgraced the family. But while Draco looked on him as a disappointing Malfoy, Narcissa, who had not been born to the name she carried, looked on him as a disappointing husband. He was not the man she had married.

Not exactly. The final gesture he had made, leaving the Manor and most of the properties to Draco, showed that he had a trace of that man left in him. And Narcissa had fallen in love with Lucius over years, while Draco had known his father from the time he was born and come to accept and love him in a different way. Narcissa's bond with Lucius had more to do with choice and free will.

This was not another chance, she reassured herself as she walked towards the house. This was another look. If Lucius could not change,

she would leave, and not look over her shoulder again, because there would be nothing there to salvage. But she had not had enough time to be sure he could not change.

Her mother's voice scolded her in the back of her head, telling her that marrying for love was a dangerous idea. Narcissa ignored it. Her mother had taken the same view of Andromeda's marriage, and her sister was happier with Ted Tonks than Narcissa had ever seen any pureblooded witch who'd done her duty by the family be. Their own rigorous training could not make up for a life lived almost without emotion.

Narcissa had been lucky in that her duty and her heart led her to the same place. Now, when they had apparently split apart, she thought she at least owed her heart a last glimpse.

She was about twenty feet away from the house when the door opened, and Lucius stood there, waiting for her with an unsurprised look on his face. Other than dark circles under his eyes that indicated a lack of sleep, he also seemed unchanged.

"Narcissa. My darling." He stepped away and made a deep bow, sweeping his arm past himself. "Do come in."

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"I wish you to tell me, any of you," Rufus went on, his eyes burning over the wizards and witches who stared at him, "when we last confronted a Lord-level wizard the age of the vates. For that matter, when did we have a vates? When did we learn that our own past wrongs—the house elves, the centaurs, the goblins, the werewolves—could have voices and come back to haunt us? When did we last learn that a wizard many of us had trusted to be a Lord and leader was a child abuser? The best of us, committing the worst crime our world can imagine?"

He paused, and waited for an answer. This was the risk that he was taking, and which the other members of the Wizengamot might not follow him into. As they grew older, many wizards grew more conservative, prone to insisting that the way they knew was the only

way. The training in pureblood dances that many of them underwent only made it worse. The pureblood dances made one strong—Rufus knew, having learned many of them himself—but they did not often make one flexible. Someone shaped by a certain set of rituals, Dark or Light, was shaped to fit only one world.

And perhaps, at one point in time, that world had been the only one that existed, the only one that a Wizengamot member needed to concern himself with. But that was not the case anymore. Rufus did not think it had been the case for the last hundred years. And he burned now, himself, at the thought of all that time lost. The Ministry could have been a beacon of progress and true Light. They might not have had to put up with idiots like Fudge.

But he could not change the past, and that included his own mistakes. He could only leap into the future.

“We have never learned anything like that,” said Griselda, her voice strong. Usually, she relied on softness to make her point, causing others to lean forward to hear her, but this time her words carried through the courtroom.

Rufus smiled at her. She had chosen to trust him. And since she was over a hundred and sixty years old, many of the Elders would remember that she had lived through events that were only ancient history to them.

“That doesn’t mean it’s right to abandon tradition in our response,” said Elizabeth Dawnborn, a fussy Elder, younger than most, but with a very metallic approach to the way the Wizengamot should do things. “We might not have had a Lord become a child abuser before, but we’ve had child abusers, and we’ve had Lords. Why not deal with them in that way, Minister Scrimgeour?” She frowned at him, and rearranged her robes around herself with a little jerk. “Why did you allow the vates to kill him and not be arrested for murder?”

“Ask anyone who was in the Ministry that day,” said Rufus gently, which only made the bite of his next words worse. “Ask anyone, Elder Dawnborn, and he will tell you of the horrors of Capto Horrifer. The wizard who would use such a spell has passed the limit that most

criminals, even child abusers, never cross. He cares only about hurting others. And Harry was the only one who could stop him.”

“It seems,” Juniper said, interposing himself with a quiet, casual grace that Rufus had to admire, “that you are determined to have exceptions for your pet vates, Rufus, whether or not they make good sense, whether or not he actually does anything to benefit the wizarding world.”

Rufus felt his eyes kindle with delight. In Juniper’s anxiety to make his point, he had not chosen his words carefully enough. “Why, Erasmus,” he said, dropping the title, as Juniper had done to him. “I thought I was his pet, that he pulled my leash, and not the other way around. Or do we take turns kneeling and barking?”

That was a risk, in a way, reminding the Elders of Juniper’s accusation. But it also pointed up the contradiction that lay in Juniper’s words, and let none of them escape it.

And, a moment later, Griselda let out a shout of laughter, which led the common reaction.

Rufus held Juniper’s eyes through the chuckles, and saw the pale skin flush. He had made a mistake, his most critical one in several days, but he might be able to regain his footing if Rufus would just let him.

Rufus did not let him.

“And that is the problem we need to solve,” he said, swinging away from Juniper and letting his passion swell his voice. He was doubly glad he had taken the bath of potions for his leg last night. It enabled him to stride back and forth rapidly, an impressive figure, rather than limping and reminding everyone of what he had lost in the First War. “We are trying too hard to approach the vates, and the changes he brings along with him or inspires, through old metaphors. He must be a pet of the Minister. No, he must be a Dark wizard, even though he is undeclared, and even though we profess to value the allegiances of other wizards when they make them, including statements of bowing to neither Dark nor Light. No, he must be only an abused

child, though the Wizengamot itself condemned his parents to Tullianum, and want to treat him like an adult otherwise. No, he must be an enemy of the state, though he has shown himself willing to negotiate when necessary.

"I propose a new set of metaphors, witches and wizards. I propose making a treaty with the vates as if he were the Minister of another country, recognizing him as an adult before he turns seventeen, and appointing him the liaison between the Ministry and groups such as the werewolf packs."

That made them erupt, as Rufus had known it would.

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Narcissa lifted her head. "I am not stupid, Lucius," she said quietly. "I know the house will not permit anyone not of the elder Malfoy blood to enter it. I don't fancy being thrown on my knees for you to laugh at."

"My dear," Lucius said, and lounged against the doorway as if lounging were an art, "when was the last time I laughed while you were on your knees?"

That one, Narcissa had to admit, I stumbled right into. She kept her head up and watched her husband, noting the exact position of his wand hand. Nonverbally, she cast the incantation that would tell her where any wood on his body was. It couldn't catch all weapons, of course, since it would miss metal blades, but it would reveal the hiding place of a wand.

She blinked when she realized that he carried no wand at all, that it must still be inside the house, and stared at him.

"I don't need a wand to talk to you." Lucius studied her from behind a strand of blowing blond hair, and spoke the preposterous sentence with easy confidence.

"You could not know that," said Narcissa quietly. The silence around the heath and the house seemed to absorb any words she might

have spoken anyway, even if she had shouted. She wondered if it was the effect of spells, or if perhaps the Malfoy ancestor who had built this house here had chosen the place for its quietude. "I might have come prepared to kill you, Lucius. You embarrassed your family, which is my family by right of marriage, and cost your son's partner and allies."

"My son's partner and allies are not my son," Lucius said. "And you are not my son, either, Narcissa. You are my wife. What we have between us is connected to what we have between us and Draco, but not the same. You know that."

"Need I remind you that I chose Draco the last time you gave me a choice?"

"I did not give you a choice," said Lucius. "I made the choice myself, and thought to inform you. That was my mistake, Narcissa."

Narcissa stiffened slightly. That had indeed been what offended her the most about the way Lucius handled Draco's disownment. He had not asked her advice, nor even listened to the few slight hints she tried to give him about the building conflict between him and Draco. He had simply signed the documents and assumed she would agree. She had thought, when she Apparated away from the Manor after their duel, that that was something Lucius would never realize.

But he had realized it, and that made him infinitely more dangerous.

As well as more attractive.

Narcissa felt suddenly as if she were back in the heady first days of their courtship, when every encounter with Lucius had the thick excitement of a lovers' meeting, and the tension of a battle. Neither of them backed down from the other. Show a weakness, and the other would bite in an instant. She had won some battles and lost others. But she had grown, almost, to think during the last year that Lucius would never win again.

I deserve to lose this one, then, for being that stupid. But the competition is not quite over yet, because he does not know everything.

"I gave Harry my permission to drain your magic." Narcissa made sure to empty her voice of emotion, and Lucius's leg twitched the tiniest bit. "Draco agreed to the same thing."

"You did not want me dead," said Lucius, "but alive and a Squib. Did you not think I would prefer to be dead, Narcissa?"

"Lucius, dear one," said Narcissa, with a faint sigh and a fainter smile, "you did not listen to me. Drained of magic. You would not be a Squib, but a Muggle, the way that Harry's mother became."

This time, it was Lucius's lips that twitched, giving the round to her.

"As for what you preferred," said Narcissa, "no, frankly, at that point in time, it never crossed my mind, Lucius. You had betrayed one of our allies and put your son and your leader in a horrible position. You had embarrassed the Malfoy family name. I was more concerned with the possible shame and degradation you had left behind you."

"Ah." Lucius tilted his head and let his eyelids slip to half-mast. "And you have come to find out why I did it, Narcissa, and to scold me for it if possible."

"I prefer the term show you your mistakes."

Lucius nodded. "You would. The simple reason I did it, Narcissa, was to maintain my life and my power in as good a state as I could leave them. Betraying Parkinson helped to provoke Harry into a course of action I hoped would be easier to control than his career throughout September, and it removed the Unspeakables from blackmailing me—I imagined. And my son should be able to survive on his own, without my support, and without being judged by my shadow. If he is, then he has not yet achieved the independence and the political recognition that he needs to make a difference in the world, and he is still only 'Harry's lover,' not 'Draco Malfoy.' This served as a test of

Draco, in the long run, to see how well he would adapt—a more controlled and less dangerous test than many I could have devised.”

Narcissa thought for a long, fleeting, wild moment. She could accuse him of not wanting to test Draco at all, of getting caught up by events, but he had rewritten similar circumstances in his mind before. He could deny it and claim that he had intended this “exam” for Draco from the beginning. He might even believe it by now, the way he believed he had been the one to provoke Draco into challenging him for his confirmation as magical heir.

So she took his words instead. With Lucius, it was always better to do so. “So you maintained your life and your power, Lucius? Is that all?”

By the flare in her husband’s eyes, he saw the trap then, but Narcissa was speaking too fast for him to forestall her by interruption.

“How pathetic.” Narcissa gave him a steady gaze, raking him up and then down. “How pathetic that you wished simply to remain as you were, instead of pushing forward, Lucius. Did you not once tell me that you wanted to become more than you were, and that was the only reason worth risk-taking?”

He bared his teeth at her, mask cracked for the first time since the conversation had begun.

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Rufus waited to see who would speak the first question. Really, he would be disappointed if it were not Juniper. He should recover quickly enough to head the pack.

“What is the meaning of this, Minister?” And sure enough, that was Elder Juniper, his voice calm and cold and utterly in contrast with the warm promise of the firebird on his robes. “Do you really think the vates, who has reminded us often enough that he is independent of the Ministry, will agree to become a liaison for us? When he is already pushing forward the campaign to give halfbreed children rights that their inhuman instincts should deny them? The vates is a

child, a dangerous one, with a sense of impulse but no sense of pacing or the rights of others.”

Erasmus, Erasmus, Erasmus. Rufus stifled the temptation to shake his head in sorrow at the Elder’s fumbling. You have just said many things that you should not have.

“Owls fly faster than words, Elder,” he said, and unfolded Harry’s letter that he’d received yesterday evening, tapping it with his wand. A neutral voice began to read Harry’s words out loud, confirming that he knew the fight for the rights of half-human wizards would take some time, and that he was willing to wait. Rufus kept his eyes on Juniper all the way through the recitation, and saw his face turning steadily whiter. By the time the words finished, Rufus thought it was all Juniper could do not to twitch.

Rufus lowered the letter, and said calmly, into that dazed silence, “Harry vates does not walk independently of the Ministry when he does not have to. He let a hunting season be proclaimed before he chose to oppose us with violence on behalf of the werewolves and shelter fugitives, despite the oath that said his blood would turn to silver if he did not openly help them. He refused the Order of Merlin at first because he felt he did not deserve it. When he did accept it, it was only reluctantly and with assurances that he did deserve it.” Rufus felt a pang of regret at that. As much as that trait of Harry’s was helping him right now, it was one he would rather Harry did not have. “Now he has agreed to step back and wait on a cause that’s very important to him. Does that sound like someone who will refuse to work with us, to obey the laws? Does that sound like an impulsive, hotheaded child who cannot control himself? Does that sound like someone who would, in fact, refuse to be our liaison with the packs?”

Silence answered him, and then Griselda Marchbanks. “No. It does not.”

“It really doesn’t.” That was Daisy Longchamps, an Elder who had followed Juniper, but whom Rufus often trusted to see good sense. It just had to be shoved in her face first. She spoke reluctantly now, but with a set determination to her jaw that said she wouldn’t back down.

“No. It does not.” Rufus cocked his head like a bird at Juniper, who was looking considerably paler now. “Nor does it sound like someone unworthy of the extra autonomy I propose to give him, especially when he will be seventeen at the end of July. What he sounds like is a unique person, the first vates anywhere in the world. I would have Britain honored by this distinction, Elders, not confounded by it. Right now, we are easy targets for international criticism. But the other Ministries, the other wizarding communities, do not have our problems. Very smug they can be, resting on their laurels and congratulating themselves on their belief that they would deal better with a vates in their care.”

He spun away and lifted his hand, the one not holding Harry’s letter but his wand, high. “But suppose we show them that not only do we have a vates—he was born in our country and no other, he is British, he is ours—but we can work with him, use his goals to make our community better, our laws more just, our people more forward-looking? They will have egg on their faces for laughing at us then. Instead of claiming they could do so much better, they will have to do that much better, and without the luxury of a vates who will work with them.

“We can gain our prominence back with this change, as we will gain so much else. I can see objections rising that treating with Harry as we would a Minister will weaken our position—“ that was the next thing Juniper would have said, Rufus just knew it “—but I say that we can hardly be weaker than we are right now, when we flounder and scrabble madly in our indecision about the werewolf packs, and a sixteen-year-old wizard outdoes us in maturity.” He waved Harry’s letter again.

“I do not except myself from blame. I have made mistakes. I have had Light wizards believe that I am not their friend for accusing Cupressus Apollonis of child abuse, and, as Harry says, I am aware that I might be forced out, as much for making this suggestion as for anything else.

“But I say to you that I am ready and willing to make amends for my mistakes, and this declaration is the first step. It seals and strengthens our bonds with our vates. It grants a concession that is

hardly a concession, given how close Harry is to wizarding maturity already. It gives the werewolves what they have asked for—a speaker who is sworn to the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, who originated them, in fact—and demands they prove that they mean what they say about dealing with us. It determines our course, and gives our allies the potential to be strong, or falter because they are not strong enough, not because we made them falter.” He paused, and flashed a smile around the room. “It makes us look damn good.”

The laughter broke out again, led by Elizabeth Dawnborn this time, who stood up to clap. A few witches and wizards followed her, then more, until ten of them were standing. It was a start, Rufus thought, his heart pounding with excitement, especially since some of those standing had been Juniper’s most noteworthy allies.

“Minister,” Dawnborn said, her eyes flashing with that same contagious excitement, “what you say makes sense. And I would much rather have this move into the light of day. I am sick of debating about the packs and chasing the same words around again and again. I wish others to know what I am doing, where I stand. An official announcement will have that advantage as well as all the others you named. I support your proposal.”

Ah, the honesty of the Light. Rufus was pleased. Dawnborn had an allergy to sneaking around and hiding and keeping one’s affairs private which was common to many of the old Light families. She had been Light-sworn since she was nine, a Gryffindor in Hogwarts, and well-known as an advocate for wizards and witches whom the laws had hurt before she became a Wizengamot Elder. Moreover, she was younger than most of them, and more likely to be won heart and soul by a passionate speech.

Glancing around the room, Rufus could see that it wasn’t that way with all of them. Some would hesitate, and not commit fully in heart and mind until they saw if this worked. But all of them could catch the mood of the room now. Opposing Rufus in public at this moment was political suicide.

I wonder if more of them will go along because they think they must, and everyone else believes in what I am doing, than will go along because they believe in what I am doing?

It was a most amusing thought. Of course, the biggest test was yet to come.

Rufus turned to face Elder Juniper. "Elder Dawnborn has been particularly eloquent in her appreciation of my efforts," he said. "Your thoughts, sir?"

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"You do not have a right to call me pathetic," Lucius said, his voice drained of emotion, but full of clenching teeth. "Or what are you doing here, Narcissa, seeking a husband you claim has embarrassed the family?"

Narcissa cocked her head. Some of the funniest moments in her marriage—not necessarily the best, of course—came when Lucius insulted himself without realizing it. "Lucius," she said.

"What?" That was a hiss. If Lucius had been a cat, his ears would have been pinned straight back against his head.

"You do realize that you have just called yourself a pathetic quest object, don't you?" Narcissa kept her voice gentle.

Lucius opened his mouth slightly and raised a leg as if he would step forward. Narcissa tensed, the situation returning to her in a rush. If he came out on the heath, out from under the protection of the wards, she would be obligated to at least try to bind him and take him back to Hogwarts so Harry could drain his magic.

The thought that she wouldn't try very hard flashed through her mind, but she caught and slaughtered it. She would try. She might have come to visit Lucius, but that was a very far cry from letting him escape, or even duel her. She had made her choice. Draco and Harry had her loyalty and her love, Lucius only her love.

Luckily for both of them, Lucius halted where he was, his head lowering slightly so that his blond hair fell across his face. Narcissa waited, her fingers clasped along her wand like twigs.

“If I built it back up again?”

Lucius’s voice was so soft that Narcissa almost could not hear him. “What did you say?”

He stared at her. “If I built it back up again?” he repeated, insistently. “If I built a reputation for myself? There are still Ministry contacts that answer to me, and not to Draco—personal favors I did for them, and which I am owed, that have nothing to do with the Malfoy line. And there is—there are compensations under the pureblood rituals for what I did to Parkinson. She is not compelled to accept them, but she is compelled to at least listen to me, or betray her own honor.”

Narcissa controlled her breathing, but it was hard. Nothing Lucius ever did had so deeply shaken her. For him to adopt the position of petitioner was—unheard of. Even with Harry, he had always arranged matters so that he was not simply apologizing or making amends, but performing another step in the truce-dance, or doing something else that reminded the “wronged” party of their fundamental equality.

Narcissa knew the apology rituals. There was a reason they were rarely used. They simply required more humility than most Dark purebloods had.

“You didn’t give Draco this house,” she said. “You didn’t give Draco the whole fortune. Some Galleons were missing, transferred to a separate account a few days before you signed those documents.”

Lucius’s eyes flared with triumph, and something more than that. Pride in her, Narcissa realized, pride that she had figured it out. “Yes.”

“You intended to use this as more than a place to hide from us,” she murmured. “You intended all the time to build your reputation back up, and to approach us on a more equal footing when you’d made yourself indispensable again.”

Some strong emotion was moving in her, like a current of dark water. She would call part of it love, and part of it hatred, and part of it surprise at Lucius's sheer audacity. The rest was not safe to name.

"Always."

She watched the proud line of his throat, the flash of his eyes, and knew that part of her would always be in love with this man, no matter what he did, no matter what words or disloyalties passed between them. And she could not condemn that part. It was reality that it existed. No one ever got anywhere by fighting reality.

"I cannot answer your question," she said. "About what would happen if you built it up again. Because I do not know if that's possible. I do not know if you could cause Draco and Harry to forgive you, or make matters up to Hawthorn Parkinson for almost killing her and bringing up the memories of her daughter again as well as betraying her to the Unspeakables."

Lucius didn't flinch when she listed the wrongs done to Hawthorn. Of course he did not. Narcissa knew he did not regret them.

Selfish bastard. Malfoy. Lucius.

"And if I did?" he asked. "If I showed you that it is possible? Would you give me a fair hearing, Narcissa?"

A moment passed, of wind and silence and the desolation of the heath.

"I would," Narcissa said, and for a moment she let tears show in her eyes, vulnerability to complement the vulnerability that Lucius had shown her with his bowed head and soft voice. "You know I must, you bastard. No proper witch could ignore someone so strong and so beautiful."

She reveled in his self-satisfied smile. She had wanted to see it again. They were both yielding to each other: she promising to reconsider

him, he admitting that he cared enough about her and Draco's opinion to try to do this.

The dance is not ended. I do not think it can be until one of us is dead.

He did not speak again as she stepped back and Apparated away, but he did kiss the back of his hand to her. Narcissa saw him, and carried the gesture with her into darkness, and then the bright, quiet beauty of Silver-Mirror.

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What else could he do?

He must say one thing, for all that it screamed and scraped against his instincts, for all that he had come into Courtroom Ten intending to say something entirely different.

The firebird was warm on his back. The ghosts of Light wizards past watched him, judging him under the eye of history, the only judge who was always correct, who was all-knowing.

And Erasmus Juniper had to raise his eyes to Minister Scrimgeour's and agree that, yes, his proposal sounded like one that would work, and would offer all the advantages he had promised.

Watching Scrimgeour's eyes kindle was like a punch to the stomach. But he had endured worse political defeats. What he had never done, he thought, was to lose a contest like this when there was so much at stake—possibly the very future of Light wizardry and the traditions it had preserved down all the centuries.

He waited in silence while the Minister made another speech, extolling the virtues of his proposal, and then called for a formal vote. Given what he had done beforehand, calling on them to make their opposition or agreement clear, it was self-evident that his proposal would pass, and it did, with only a few of the bravest abstaining.

Erasmus would have abstained, but he knew it would make him look like a sulky child. Therefore, he voted to tie that irresponsible child to

the Ministry, and Scrimgeour thanked him with a smile too real to be sincere.

After that, there were only a few moments before he could escape from the chamber, retrieving his cloak from the Auror on the way. The robes he had intended to wear as a sign of triumph, emblazoned and blazing with the firebird, now seemed more like a sign of shame.

He Floored back to his own home, and spent some time standing in front of the hearth, his head bowed, deep in thought, one hand braced on the flat stones of the wall. He had to calm himself down before his afternoon meeting with Aurora Whitestag and the other members of the budding alliance, when he would have to warn them about this setback and explain the effect it would have on their future actions. One thing was certain. A good portion of their support in the Wizengamot was gone.

Desperation wouldn't leave that easily, though. It bubbled and flowed and collected along his spine, clinging in large gobs to the walls of his stomach. Controlled breathing did no good. Counting to ten in all the languages he knew, the languages of other countries and the subject magical creatures, did no good.

And why should it? Didn't this situation deserve a reaction of panic, of desperation? And few people would give it one.

Of course, Erasmus thought, few people understood what was at stake.

Not even Aurora Whitestag and the allies she had helped to gather truly understood, though Erasmus thought Cupressus Apollonis might come close. They did not know that Light wizardry was dying, that too great a departure from their traditions could easily mean that they would never have those traditions back.

Erasmus spelled off his robe and set it to floating in front of him, where he could gaze at the dazzling firebird. Done in shades of gold that became red near its body, with a long red beak and legs and a dull scarlet eye, it danced above depictions of wizarding buildings throughout the ages. So those wizards who had borne the symbol

had danced about something lovely and fragile, the flame of honor, of bravery, of true goodness, always guarding and tending it carefully lest it go out in the winds of wickedness.

They had had a point, Erasmus thought. Even when the Ministry was built, even when Light wizards came to dominate Dark in Britain's wizarding community through a series of Ministers who were all Light, with every Dark Wizengamot Elder or Lord falling into the traps of corruption and slavery in the end, the thing they guarded was still a shimmering and fragile flame. Not all the structures and strictures in the world would protect a living thing from dying if someone crept through the bindings and poisoned it.

And that had happened. The Ministry had become an institution. Wizards who should have known better had let their Declarations to the Light become routine. Dark wizards were allowed to go free and avoid paying for their crimes, including torture, rape, and murder, because they had money.

And now the very species that those ancient Light wizards had bound, in the sure and certain knowledge that someone must be at the bottom in any society, were breaking free, and threatening to smother the last gutters of the flame that were left. The Grand Unified Theory was the tool in their arsenal meant to turn wizard against wizard if the accusations of cruelty towards magical creatures didn't work, meant to make them doubt themselves and the blood and the heritage that had always singled them out and made them special.

Erasmus had built on perceptions like that as he rose, seeking out people who felt the same way he did, and could have the same passionate conviction to the cause of goodness and Light, the same desire to protect what was innocent and pure in their world.

But few people were used to that level of committed thinking. Few felt the eyes of their ancestors on them all the time. Indeed, the people who seemed to do so were most often Dark purebloods, and of course they would not hesitate to bribe and flatter and corrupt their opponents. That was in the best family tradition of Dark wizards, after all.

Erasmus snorted, and swung, his robe floating behind him, to eat lunch and dress for his meeting with Whitestag and her supporters.

Well, he would show others that level of thinking. Whitestag and the rest thought they were using him. He was educating them in the meanwhile, making them shed their small perceptions and rise higher, showing them that the real danger of the vates lay in the real, beautiful things he would kill in the rush to strive after some vague vision of “betterment.”

This was only a small setback. Erasmus did not intend to allow that torch, passed from generation to generation and still ablaze with love, honor, and tradition, to go out.

Chapter Ninety-Two: Lie In My Arms This Night

“Parvati, we have to get—ah—“

Parvati shut him up by leaning in and snogging him thoroughly. Connor gave in and wrapped his arms around her, more than happy to be a few minutes late to Charms if it meant that he got to kiss her a bit more, and hear the very interesting sound she made when he shifted a bit closer to her, like this—

Of course, Parvati, the tease, backed up and left him that way, with a small smile flirting at the corners of her mouth. Connor growled and reached for her again, but Parvati said innocently, “We'll be late to Charms if we don't hurry, Connor,” and dashed down the corridor as if she were as intent on making good marks as Hermione was.

Connor took a moment to rearrange himself, including straightening his tie and murmuring a few useful charms to cover up the marks Parvati had planted all over his neck. It wasn't every day that his girlfriend grabbed him where he was waiting outside Potions for Hermione, hurried him into an alcove down the corridor, and settled in for some serious snogging. Apparently, Parvati had seen something in Divination that made Professor Trelawney praise her and give thirty points to Gryffindor. Connor never had got to ask what it was, because it was a little difficult to ask complicated questions when his tongue was in Parvati's mouth.

To be fair, it would have been a little difficult to ask complicated questions when his tongue was in anyone else's mouth, either. But since his experience with other people's mouths was limited and Parvati wouldn't take it kindly if he were to experiment, Connor decided that he wouldn't mention that thought to her.

Honestly, said the prim Hermione-voice of his conscience. Snogging in the dungeons like a pair of teenagers.

We are a pair of teenagers, Connor answered the voice with satisfaction. It tended to shut up in the face of common sense, which even Hermione could recognize, and it did so now.

Connor checked himself over one more time, knowing by now that he would be late to Charms, but not caring. He'd received a kiss from Parvati and managed to do it in the dungeons without Snape or the Slytherins catching them and shut the annoying voice of his conscience up. Life was good.

At least, life was good until he passed the door to Snape's office, which, unusually, stood half-open. Connor had to pause and investigate that, didn't he? Anyone could have got in if the door was half-open, or anything. Hagrid had been talking about trying to raise manticores again lately. One could have wandered into Snape's office and stung him, and then Connor could rush in and heroically save him.

Then he listened to the voices that were coming through the door, and his grin disappeared.

"Explain to me why you were smiling during Potions today," Snape said, as if it were something he had a right to demand.

Harry's voice was soft and wary. Confused. Connor had heard him like that before, when Harry tried to placate him in the midst of a temper tantrum. It was a tone he had really hoped he would never have to listen to again. "But, sir—"

Snape actually growled. Connor drew his wand. I don't care what he is to Harry, guardian or foster father or whatever part he's playing in this twisted little game. I don't trust him. I don't even trust him the way I trust Draco. If he hurts my brother, he's going to get hurt.

"Severus," Harry corrected, with that little sigh in his tone that meant this was something that happened often. "I thought you would be happy. I was using a rare Occlumency technique to keep myself from feeling most of my emotions, but Professor Belluspersona caught me and made me stop."

I'll just bet she did, Connor thought smugly. The Transfiguration Professor was the sternest teacher in the school. And better her than Snape to catch Harry in the middle of something like this.

"You should have come to me," said Snape, his voice going quiet and strained. Connor would have felt sorry for him if that were possible, but five years of horrible treatment in Potions class because of who his father was had left their mark. He didn't, not really. "I would have been happy to help you with Occlumency, Harry. It is much more my expertise, and she could have easily damaged you, poking about in your mind."

"She didn't poke about in my mind, Severus," Harry hastened to reassure him. That made Connor grind his teeth, how eager Harry seemed to assure Snape that his mind was Snape's private and internal sanctum. Stubborn, greasy git. Can't he just be happy that Harry's smiling again, without worrying about how it happened? "She discovered it from my behavior, from undirected magic in Transfiguration. And she made me promise not to do it again."

There was a silence. Connor recognized it as a waiting silence. He frowned and tapped his wand in the crook of his arm. What can he want now?

"You have made that promise many times before, Harry," Snape said, with a voice like a building thunderstorm.

"I know," Harry snapped, and for the first time Connor could hear annoyance, tension, in his tone. "This is different. This was a vow. If I don't keep it, then she punishes me. And the punishment is one that wouldn't hurt me as much as it would hurt someone else, but it's humiliating, and it would mean I failed. That's the reason I asked for it. I promise you, Severus, I want to avoid the failure that would come with another suppression of my emotions. And I did promise her in such a way as to cover the suppression of all emotions, not just with the technique I was using. I used ice, but—"

"You used ice?"

Connor had heard enough. He recognized the sound that followed Snape's exclamation, which was a long stride forward. He just knew that Snape would grab Harry in the next moment. He'd already crossed the distance that separated them.

He burst in through the door, aimed his wand, and flung the spell that Peter had taught him last summer with all his strength. He'd been quite excited and proud of it, and couldn't wait to show it to Harry, until he found out Harry already knew it. But that didn't mean it couldn't be useful now, especially since it was a Light spell, and Connor was good at those.

“Aurora ades dum!”

A sunburst of light opened inside Snape's mouth, spreading to encompass his eyes and blind him. With a yell, he fell back. Connor used the chance to put himself between the greasy git and his brother, half-choking on a battle cry. He couldn't decide whether the name of Lux Aeterna would be appropriate to shout here or not.

“Connor!” Harry said in a horrified voice, and shoved at his shoulder blades.

Connor paid him no mind. If Harry had really wanted to hurt him, he would have used magic. And he had heard a soft clink as Snape fell. That was more important than his brother's whinging on about what he'd done to the professor.

With a sense of absolute, confident righteousness, Connor aimed his wand at Snape's right hand, which was caught halfway up to his face, as if he knew that wiping at it wouldn't take away the blindness. “Accio potions vial!”

Snape's hand opened, and a vial soared out of it and into Connor's palm. Connor grabbed it the way he would a Snitch, and turned it around, staring. The potion pressed inside it wasn't one he recognized—of course, he didn't recognize most potions—but he was certain he would have remembered if he'd seen it before. It was thick, and silvery, and clung to the glass like Parvati tended to cling to him when they were absolutely certain they were alone.

“See?” he said, turning it around and holding it up to Harry. “He was going to force this down your throat.”

Harry gave him a withering glance. Connor had predicted that he would. "He was not."

"Why don't you ask him?" Reluctantly, Connor turned around and performed the counterspell on Snape, so that the light of the Dawn Summons stopped blinding him. "He was holding it in his hand. I heard it clink when he hit the floor. Did you know he had it? Do you know what it does?" He again tilted the vial, this time so that Harry could watch the light sparkle off the potion.

"That—" Harry stopped. Connor saw a trace of disturbance in his eyes. He probably still didn't believe that Snape had planned to poison him, however true it was, but he didn't recognize the potion, and that was enough to confirm Connor's suspicions that Snape had been up to no good.

A building hiss made him twist around again, stepping in front of Harry as he tried to get to Snape. Their professor looked half-crazed with anger, blinking and shaking his head like a bear stung by bees, but Connor didn't care. He was going to protect his brother. Harry had done enough of that for him during their childhood. Now it was his turn.

"You realize that you could be expelled for attacking a professor, Mr. Potter?" Snape's voice was not loud, but obviously meant to be cutting. Connor had seen him reduce third-years to tears with less.

Connor was no third-year. "Not if I attacked in self-defense, Professor," he said, and his voice was as cool as mountain snow. Always stay calm in the aftermath of battle, the part of his mind that sounded like Peter whispered to him. Nothing disconcerts your opponents so much. "Or defense of another. I might have been mistaken, of course. I'm sure that you have a perfectly good reason to be approaching Harry with an unfamiliar potion in hand, holding it so that he can't see it." He paused and gave Snape an expectant glance.

"Insolent brat," Snape said, giving both words the full weight of his temper. "You will have detention for a month. I will arrange it with Minerva so that Gryffindor House loses the rest of its points—"

"We've won the Quidditch Cup anyway, even if we don't get the House Cup," said Connor comfortably, and ignored Snape's furious glare. "I want to know what the potion is. I want to know why Harry didn't know you had it." Harry chose to make things more complicated just then by trying to take a step forward. Connor briefly wrestled with him, and managed to make him stay in place. He and Harry were the same height, but he was stronger, probably because Harry still wasn't completely used to having two hands.

Snape was silent. Connor aimed his wand at him. "We're waaai-ting," he said in a singsong.

"The potion is an experimental one of mine," said Snape, reluctantly. Connor thought he was glancing elsewhere to avoid Harry's eyes, not his, but so long as the professor looked properly ashamed of himself, Connor did not care. "It heals Occlumency wounds, like the ones that Harry sustained in his battle with Tom Riddle in second year. I was going to give it to Harry so that any wounds left over from his use of ice might heal."

"Going to give it to Harry?" Connor echoed. "Force it down his throat, more like."

"That's enough, Connor."

Harry was using That Voice. Connor reluctantly stepped out of the way, and Harry glared at him for a moment, little puffs of cold air rising from his mouth, before he sighed and glanced at Snape.

"I appreciate your help, Professor," he said firmly. "But I've made the vow, and failing now, suppressing my emotions, would be so humiliating that it won't happen again. I've looked at my mind and had Draco look at it. I have no wounds. I melted the ice in time. I appreciate your intention to help me. But force-feeding me a potion is not the way to do it."

I knew that was what he was going to do! Connor folded his arms, letting his wand hang over his left elbow. He fought the urge to crow at the look on Snape's face. It was tormented, confused, as if he

himself didn't know what he'd planned. In a normal mood, Connor might have felt sorry for him, given the noticing that wouldn't stop. But that very confusion spoke against Snape. It said that he might have forced the potion down Harry's throat, if it had suited him to do so. He should have just given a denial that he would ever do such a thing.

Harry took a deep, dragging breath, then shook his head. His voice was like river ice in early spring, Connor thought, squeaking and cracking with warmth beneath the surface. "I know you want to help. I'll always appreciate it. And the vow with Henrietta might well be a mistake. But it's my kind of mistake—the kind of vow I couldn't make to you or Draco. But, as you pointed out, I've made those kinds of vows before, and broken them each time. This one—this one, maybe I won't. It's at least different. It's at least worth a try."

More silence. Connor stopped tapping his wand as he watched the two of them. He had the oddest feeling that he shouldn't be here, that he was witnessing something so private it was hurtful.

Snape nodded, once, his eyes on Harry now. "I would not have forced the potion down your throat," he said, his voice soft. "I would have told you what it was and given you the choice before the end."

Liar, liar, Connor thought.

A smile crossed Harry's face, though, making it clear that he accepted that. "Thank you, sir," he said, and Snape didn't scold him for the title he was obviously more comfortable using. Connor thought Snape should never have made him use his first name at all. "Now, I really do have to make my way to Charms, but I promise that I'll come back this afternoon, and we can talk about this. All right?"

Snape nodded. The expression on his face made Connor glance away uncomfortably.

Harry turned to look at him then, and shook his head. "Please don't expel him, sir," he said, as if Connor were the one who had done something wrong. "He did attack in what he thought was defense of me."

"It was defense of you," Connor pointed out.

Harry looked at him patiently.

"I want to know why he had the potion concealed in his hand," Connor said stubbornly.

"Because he wished to help me, and sometimes he doesn't go about it the right way," Harry said, giving Snape a fond, exasperated glance. "And for other reasons that he and I will talk about later." His hand clenched on Connor's shoulder, and he steered him towards the door, then bowed his head and whispered in his ear, though Connor thought Snape could probably hear them anyway. He had such sharp ears that he could hear a bubble popping wrong in a potion. It was only sadism that let him ignore that so that the potions exploded all over the hated Gryffindors instead, Connor was certain. "But thank you for trying to protect me. I appreciate it."

Connor got steered out the door, and Harry shut it behind them, then raced him to Charms.

That couldn't erase the incident from Connor's mind, though. Or the fact that Snape, questioned on his behavior, had looked lost, as though he remembered nothing of the last several moments.

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Draco could feel a restless, itchy twitching climbing his shoulders, as though everything had suddenly become that place in the middle of his back where he could never scratch. Twisting didn't relieve it. Eating didn't relieve it. Rubbing his back against the stone wall, or asking Harry to scratch it for him, didn't relieve it.

He knew what it was, of course. It was the evening of the fourth of June, which made it less than twenty-four hours until the seventeenth anniversary of his birth. He would come of wizarding age, then, and his magic would mature with him. The magic was racing around under his skin, building, needing to be used.

He snapped at Harry a few times too many. Harry finally just stared at him, and Draco left their bedroom to wander the corridors and try to find someone to distract him. A duel would be pleasant, especially since he was likely to be excused any wrongdoing on the grounds of its having exercised his magic.

A shadow showed up in the corridor ahead of him. Draco became alert and pulled out his wand.

Connor came around the corner. Disappointed, Draco lowered his wand. Harry wouldn't talk to him tomorrow if he hexed his brother, and Harry talking to him tomorrow rather needed to happen, if the birthday gift Draco had asked him for was going to come off.

Connor jerked to a stop at the sight of him, and gave an equally jerky nod. Draco raised his eyebrows. Something was off. Connor usually gave him a bit of a glare, if only because Gryffindor and Slytherin were still rivals even if they weren't. But now he only peered past Draco towards the door of the Slytherin common room, as if expecting to see Harry come out.

"How is he?" he demanded.

How is he? Bewildered, Draco ran a hand through his hair, then hissed and wriggled when it felt as if all the hair on his scalp were standing up at once. It probably was, from the way Connor's mouth twitched when he looked at him.

"Just you wait until your seventeenth birthday," Draco said sulkily, trying to smooth his hair flat.

"Mine's over the summer, thank you," Connor said cheerfully. "Fewer people to watch and comment on my every move." His smile dropped away. "I want to know how Harry is after that incident with Snape this morning."

Draco frowned. "Incident with Snape?"

Connor's eyebrows would run out of forehead to climb across soon. "He didn't tell you?"

“No, he didn’t.” Draco shoved away the memory of Harry trying to tell him something during lunch, but shutting up when Draco complained and carried on about his gathering magic and insisted that Harry scratch his back again. “What happened?”

“I heard him and Snape arguing,” said Connor. “About him suppressing his emotions and a vow he made to Professor—Belluspersona.” Draco was a bit impressed that Connor had the presence of mind to use Professor Bulstrode’s fake name even here, even now. “Then Snape took a step forward, and I intervened and cast a spell at him to stop him. Turned out he was holding a silver potion to cure Occlumency wounds. He claimed that he would have given Harry a choice about taking it, but, here’s the thing, he held it in his hand, out of sight, and he couldn’t answer when I first asked him about what it was and what he intended with it. Harry didn’t recognize the potion, either.” Connor’s hazel eyes were almost amber with fury, as if reliving the incident had caused him to get angry all over again. “I think Harry was going to talk to him later and straighten matters out, but I didn’t get a chance to catch him after dinner and ask how that went. So. How is he?”

“Brooding,” Draco said softly, now thoroughly distracted from the fact that he would be seventeen tomorrow. “Not as patient as he usually is.”

“Damn it.” Connor tapped his fingers against his wand. “Even when he isn’t suppressing his emotions, it takes a lot to get him that angry.”

“Yes.”

Draco was going to blame the magic. The magic not only opened new pathways in his body so that it could rush along them more easily—a wizard’s seventeenth birthday was the occasion of a wizard’s attaining full magical strength—but opened new pathways in his mind, too. That was why he was having these thoughts. He couldn’t escape, and it wasn’t his fault he had them.

But he was now thinking what an incident like that with Snape would have done to Harry, particularly if they hadn’t been able to make the

argument up later—and he didn't think they had, from Harry's reaction. And on top of that had been his complaining and his demand for an elaborate spoiling tomorrow.

Damn it.

He had been acting like a spoiled child again. It was at least as easy, Draco thought, for him to slide back into that as it was for Harry to slide back into controlling his emotions and being addicted to hiding from them.

Stupid thoughts. Stupid magic!

But the fact remained that he would be a legal adult tomorrow, and a magical one, and he did not want to act like a spoiled child on that day. Some other people did. He had been doing it. Now, he didn't want to.

He had changed his mind on his birthday present, again. He would have to go and tell Harry that.

He was about to turn and head back into the Slytherin common room when he realized that he probably owed Connor thanks, or something of the kind. Stupid magic, making me think stupid adult thoughts.

He sighed and turned around. "I'll—do what I can to take care of him," he said. "Thanks for letting me know I had to."

Connor's eyes grew round, and Draco smugly congratulated himself. That had been the exact right thing to say, it appeared, in everything from the words to the tone he'd phrased it in.

"You're welcome," Connor said, a moment later, after some more staring. "And do tell me how he feels later. Just don't tell me any details of shagging that you get up to." He gave an exaggerated shiver, then turned and walked back in the direction of Gryffindor Tower.

Not shagging, Draco thought, as he spoke the password and the wall slid open for him. I don't think that will work this time. I want a way to

make us both happy tomorrow, without the confines of a ritual, and without making Harry feel that he has to do something for me or even for himself. Just a normal day.

That sounds right.

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He didn't remember.

That was the most disturbing thing about his conversation with Snape, Harry thought, lying back on his pillow and staring at the canopy of his bed with his hands clasped behind his head. Snape didn't remember picking up the potion, didn't remember deciding that Harry had Occlumency wounds that had to be healed willy-nilly, didn't remember what he would have done with the potion if Connor hadn't chosen that moment to intervene. Harry had talked to him for an hour that afternoon, and they'd used a Pensieve, and still they hadn't succeeded in coaxing any memories to the surface.

And then Harry had called him sir again, and there had been a row about names, and Harry had left just in time to receive a letter from Scrimgeour asking him to be the Ministry's liaison with the werewolf packs, and then Draco had demonstrated world-class whinging skills at dinner, but Harry couldn't snap at him because tomorrow was his birthday and Harry knew that meant he wasn't completely in control of his magic at the moment, and everything had left Harry tired and with a headache and the prospect of doing more of this tomorrow.

He'd penned a response to Scrimgeour after Draco left, accepting the new position—what else could he do?—and then lain back and closed his eyes and reveled in a few moments of peace alone.

It couldn't last, of course. The door had to open in a few moments, and Draco had to come back and sit on the bed. Harry braced himself for another outburst of whinging, reminding himself over and over again not to get angry, and not to suppress his emotions. Sometimes, having a sarcastic running commentary in his head could help.

"Harry?"

Well. That wasn't the tone he'd been expecting. This was soft, and probing, as if Draco really cared about what he thought. Harry looked up.

Draco was chewing his lip, looking at him with a more serious and thoughtful expression than he'd worn in—well. Ages. Then he took a deep breath and said, "I changed my mind on my birthday gift."

"Oh." Harry ignored the dull flare of disappointment in his gut. He didn't have to express his emotions, even if he had to feel them. And really, attaining legal age in the wizarding world happened only once. He should be willing to do whatever Draco wanted. He would have been happier if he could do it cheerfully, but he just couldn't. He would at least pretend to cheeriness. He forced a smile. "What would you like?"

"A normal day."

Harry blinked. "What?"

"A day when neither of us makes a special effort not to anger the other, or to live in each other's pockets," said Draco, staring at him intently. "Sometimes I think everything is too intense for us, Harry. We have the rituals, and we have days like today where I'm in intense pain and you're worrying intensely about Snape, but feel you can't show that to me in case I take it wrong." Harry started to ask how Draco had found out about his argument with Snape, but Draco was plunging on. "So I'd like just a normal day. Feel whatever you like. Say whatever you like to me, or don't say it; if you want to keep silent about some things, that's fine, too. And I'll try to be normal, too, and respond to you with the maturity I've been lacking lately."

Harry was at a loss for words. All he could really think of to say was, "Draco, it's your birthday."

"And this is what I want."

I don't trust him to want only that, Harry thought, and was mortified to know that he'd thought it. But it was true. He didn't trust Draco

enough not to think he wouldn't change his mind and want some more expensive or better birthday present a second later.

He could think that Draco was lying to make him feel better. He couldn't trust that Draco wanted this.

Draco either saw it in his face, or jumped into his mind and read it that way. He shook his head firmly. "This is the truth, Harry," he said. "I want—I want to see if it's possible." He sounded as if he were groping for words. "If it isn't, then we'll at least know that. And if it is, then, well, it's new, and I'm supposed to have several new experiences tomorrow."

Harry kept studying him, and Draco's expression never faltered. He didn't lean forward and kiss Harry, either, the way that he did when he was trying to persuade him down some new path. He just—wanted, and it seemed like that was going to have to be enough. Maybe it was enough.

Harry nodded, and, cautiously, dropped the burden he'd assigned himself of making Draco's birthday tomorrow perfect and splendid because he knew Draco would want him to make it that way. "All right."

"Thanks." Draco nodded back, then turned to reach into his trunk. "Did you happen to have that book that Peter said could help us with that Defense essay? I've gone to the library, and someone else has it."

"I think Hermione does, but I know the answers anyway," Harry offered. "I'll share them with you."

"Thanks," Draco repeated.

They started on their homework. Harry fought the temptation to poke at the tentative silence between them, which was relaxing him more than anything else could have done.

I could wake up tomorrow and find that Draco's changed his mind again. I have to be ready for that.

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In fact, the only thing on Draco's mind when he woke in the morning was the intense pressure in the center of his chest.

He had expected it, though. He lay still for a few moments, eyes tightly shut, gasping in controlled breaths, and waiting until the magic could pool in the center of his chest and start spreading out again. It formed iron molds around his heart and lungs, but it was not nearly as frightening as the Lung Domination Curse had been. He simply had trouble breathing for that length of time, and as each moment passed, he actually grew more hopeful. The longer one had to wait, the more powerful one was likely to become—or, more accurately, the more one's magic would unfold.

The magic darted away from his lungs in a few minutes, though, and wound through the rest of his body like vines. Draco shrugged as best as he could where he lay in bed. This was a normal day, and he was determined to face what would be normality for the rest of his life with equanimity. I always knew I wasn't the strongest wizard in the school. That title was taken long before I had a chance at it. And besides, it's not how much power you have, it's how you use it.

"All right?"

Draco glanced sideways. Harry was propped up on one elbow, watching him. Draco nodded.

"Good." Harry touched his hair in a good-morning gesture, then slid out of bed and wandered over to use the loo. A ripple of glassy motion followed him. Draco smiled. Argutus. The Omen snake had shown up last night and been insistent on spending some time with Harry, who'd argued with him for a while in Parseltongue, or perhaps played; the hisses all sounded the same to Draco. And now he was going in to share the warm water of the shower, which he loved, and perhaps another argument.

It was all perfectly fine, Draco reminded himself sternly. Harry had other people in his life besides him. Even if some of the people were snakes, Draco could give him time alone with them.

Besides, his first gift had arrived.

Two owls escorted it in, one of them real—his mother's owl Regina, all stern eyes and flashing talons; she had no time for anyone but her mistress, really—and one of them a magical construct created to support the package. Draco relaxed as he saw that the box was the size he had expected it to be. He didn't need spoiling from Harry. He was going to get quite enough spoiling from everyone else.

He opened the box, once Regina had circled around his head to show her disdain and the magical construct had faded away, and stared. He knew his mother would entrust him with a treasure when he came of age that she thought him too young for at other birthdays, but he hadn't expected something quite this rich.

He drew it out slowly. It shimmered and flashed, even in the relatively dim light of their bedroom. Draco was not sure if it was gold or platinum or bronze, but whatever metal it was, it was like the sun in water. It was a narrow band of the right size to be worn around the head—a crown, in fact, though perhaps more a coronet, because it lacked spikes and knobs. On the front, where the tip would rest over his forehead, a curved serpent and dog twined together, the serpent made of silver and the dog made of obsidian.

There was a legend that the Black family descended from a royal line, though the historians all disagreed on who the family had been, and most of the time even what country they had ruled. Narcissa had once told Draco there were a few artifacts remaining in the Black vaults that suggested the tales were true. He had never expected to see one, though.

The note in the box took longer to draw his attention, but once he saw it, he understood exactly why his mother had sent the crown to him.

June 5th, 1981

My darling:

I write this note on the day when you are one year old, and I can watch you squirming in your cot, sometimes turning over to watch me. I do not know if you will ever see it. That depends entirely on whether the potential I see in you is real, and not the product of a fond mother's doting love. If you achieve that potential by the time you are seventeen, you shall receive this letter, and the crown that goes with it.

The crown has been a weapon in some legends, but it is not a weapon of power. It is a weapon of knowledge, always the stronger of the two, and of wisdom. It grants lucid dreams, dreams where the dreamer may play a troublesome situation over inside his head, and see what alternatives lie either way. Since the events happen only in the dreams, you may safely experiment with decisions that you would never make awake.

Do be careful, my dear. The crown offers a sense of safety not often found in this, our tumultuous life. There have been those who used it and simply became absorbed into their dreams, because there, nothing could hurt them. Do not let that happen to you. Use the crown circumspectly and at great need. Take risks when you must. If your ancestors had not sometimes taken risks, I would not exist, and the proud line of Black would not exist, and thus neither would you.

I hope that you may someday see this, that you do not fall short of my expectations.

Your proud mother,

Narcissa Black Malfoy.

Draco whistled quietly under his breath, and stared at the coronet. The Dreamer's Crown. Yes, he had heard of it, and it hadn't originally belonged to the Black line. It must have been stolen or won or traded long ago; in those days, the pureblood families had been too proud to buy such treasures.

Well, it was his now, and he would treat it with the reverence it deserved. Carefully, he settled it back in its box and started to cast warding spells around it. No one would steal it from him, or wear it without his permission.

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Harry kept waiting for—something to happen. For someone to yell at him. For another letter to arrive saying the Ministry wanted him to take up another position that he didn't feel ready or qualified for. For Draco to change his mind and demand attention. Something.

But nothing like that appeared to be happening. No post had come for him that morning at all, and everyone else at the Slytherin table seemed interested in their own affairs. Currently, Draco was taunting Millicent; she had made several guesses about his birthday gift from his mother, and still hadn't approached the correct one. Millicent, who insisted that she must have guessed correctly a few minutes ago, was beginning to flush, while Draco looked more and more smug.

"Sausage," Argutus said, hanging around Harry's shoulder and sliding his head down the side of his neck. "Remember the important things in life. One of the most important things in life is feeding your Omen snake sausage."

"You realize that you don't even think they look like crickets anymore," Harry reminded him as he stabbed a piece of one with his fork and held it up for Argutus. The snake bolted it with a delicate combination of grace and haste.

"They don't," Argutus agreed. "Now I enjoy them for the taste alone, for I am a more refined Omen snake than I was." He turned his head and ran his tongue along the outer shell of Harry's ear. "Did I tell you that I met another of my kind in the Forest the other day?"

Harry blinked. "No."

"I did." Argutus wound his neck twice around Harry's, apparently just so that he could feel the warmth in the hollow of Harry's throat on his soft throat scales. "I told her about you, and the castle, and how well-

fed and cared for I am here. She has no human of her own, either wizard or Muggle. She was jealous.”

“You could have brought her into the castle and shared some of your food and luxuries with her,” Harry ventured.

“No. They’re mine.” Argutus’s neck seemed to swell a bit, and Harry realized he was bunching himself as if to coil around prey and crush it to death. That would have been impressive, except that he was rather coiled around Harry at the moment. Harry prodded at his scales to tell him so, and Argutus reluctantly loosened his hold a bit. “I have a territory. All animals have territories; I have heard wizards say so in the wizard language. The castle is mine. Humans can be in it, and owls, and elves, and your Many cobra, and tasty rats. But not other Omen snakes.”

“Just because someone else says you have a territory doesn’t mean you have to have one,” Harry pointed out, struggling to hide a smile. It continually amused him that Argutus had managed to learn Latin but not English. “It might not actually be an instinct for your kind. In fact, I don’t think it is. You choose your own companions, and you choose your own places to live. You could share the castle with someone else if you really wanted to.”

“Don’t want to.” Argutus had never sounded so sulky in his life, Harry thought. “Mine.” He tapped Harry’s temple with his tail. “Now make your poor, put-upon Omen snake feel better.”

Harry rolled his eyes, and followed the suggestion. And he realized, halfway through the series of comforting hisses that were mostly to appease Argutus’s vanity, that he had relaxed, and nothing bad had happened, and they were sitting at the table and having a normal day like any other snake and his Parselmouth.

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Lucius’s gift came at noon.

Draco had expected that. He’d been born at sunset on the fifth of June in 1980. It would be like his parents to take the other positions

of the sun during the day as their cue for sending presents. His mother's had come close to dawn, if not exactly at it. Though Draco had received a small host of cards and simple gifts, such as a roll of parchment from Millicent, throughout the day, his father would choose noon.

Three owls escorted it in through the Great Hall's window. Draco had just recovered from the magic holding his head in a vise, and blood still pounded in his temples, but since he'd guessed correctly about the delivery time of the gift, he'd had time to prepare. He stood to receive it, and ignored the murmurs from the tables. Other wizards and witches had turned seventeen this year and in years before, and they had received gifts like this. Other than for the few pureblood families who declared their coming of age at fifteen, this birthday was always a cause for lavish celebration.

The two magical construct owls vanished the moment Draco's hands touched the box. The real owl folded his wings and sat on top with a hoot. Draco blinked. Lucius had sent Julius, the great horned owl he used for things like Harry's truce-dance gifts. It was an honor Draco hadn't expected, especially since his recent quarrel with his father. Lucius had done the bare minimum necessary to make sure the Malfoy estate passed on to the rightful heir. A gesture like this was above and beyond the bare minimum.

It also seemed Julius wouldn't let him have the gift until he was satisfied that Draco was worthy of it. He leaned forward, placing one of his talons on Draco's hand hard enough to draw blood, and staring at him with wise, fierce, yellow eyes.

Draco stared back, and kept himself from flinching or reacting in any way at all. He didn't know what Julius was looking for, so he would just have to let him see what was there.

It appeared to work. With a clap of wings and an almost silent leap, Julius wheeled and was gone through the window he'd come in by. Draco looked down and opened the carved wooden box.

Inside lay a knife. The blade had a curious edge, Draco thought at first, twisting and seeming to rise far too high above the blade, but

then he picked it up, and realized the supposed edge was actually a shimmer of dark magic. Violent, corrupted magic, whether the original spell cast on the blade was Light or not. Draco hid his shiver. This was a knife made to kill things. It wasn't intelligent, but it didn't have to be. Everything from the rippled patterns in the steel to the uncompromising hilt—made of bone, and Draco knew it would be human bone—said so. It was a sculpted murder waiting to happen.

His father's note rested in the bottom of the box, explaining the gift, though Draco did not really need the note to know what it was. Only one kind of knife would look like this.

June 5th, 1997

My son:

Happy birthday, and congratulations on having achieved legal wizarding age with all the odds against you. I wish you health and happiness in the life you pursue, and if you are ever captured and have no hope of escape, I wish you an honorable death. This knife's edge will never dull. It will open your throat or your wrists without hesitation; if need be, if your hand shakes, it will guide itself to the cutting. Expect to feel a slight pain in your arm if you use it.

Your father,

Lucius.

Draco sighed and leaned back, eyes fastened on the knife. The knife could commit many murders, but only one Malfoy suicide. If Draco's own blood hit it, it would dissolve. But it would replenish itself, yanking on his arm bones to make itself a new hilt, drawing out the iron in his body to forge itself a new blade. Then a bit of Draco's own mind would lodge in it, the darkest and most violent part of himself, awakened when the new owner used it to commit murder.

Such a dark gift, father. But that you thought me worthy of it is—praiseworthy. Honorable. Not something I would have expected from you.

And that was probably the whole reason Lucius had sent it, Draco thought, as he placed the knife back in the box and closed it. To cause him to think about what Lucius had done. Most things his father did came back to himself, in the end.

“Are you all right?”

Harry’s hand on his shoulder and Harry’s voice in his ear were just what he needed, then, though he wouldn’t have asked. He briefly leaned back against him and nodded. “Just fine.”

He was aware, though Harry wouldn’t be, of the judging eyes of some pureblood children in the Hall. He sat down afterwards and ate his lunch, and knew they were watching him do it.

He ate every bite, calmly and without once stopping or glancing at the wooden box beside him that contained the knife.

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Harry glanced sideways, started a bit, and blinked.

Well. There’s something I didn’t think I’d ever see. Draco falling asleep in Arithmancy.

Harry knew it was most likely the fault of the magic humming through Draco’s body, but it was still funny. Draco was sprawled across his desk, his head bowed at an angle that would make his neck hurt like fury when he woke up, and one arm half-folded around his face, as if to cover up the equations he was working on from prying eyes. His other arm hung off the desk, trembling a little. That could have been from the force of his snores, Harry thought, laughter bubbling up, or from the magic working up and down beneath his skin, preparing his body for the burst that would occur at sunset.

He tried to force down his amusement, and then remembered what Draco had said to him. A normal day. I can feel amused if I want. It’s funny.

Even funnier was the expression on Professor Vector's face when she came up behind Draco. "Mr. Malfoy," she said, a little louder than strictly necessary. Or maybe a little softer than strictly necessary, Harry thought, given that Draco didn't stir. Harry had to muffle a snicker.

The professor gave him a narrow-eyed glance. Harry bent innocently over his equations, and worked innocently on them, like a good little student who didn't fall asleep in class.

"Mr. Malfoy," Vector said, and that did it. Draco sat up abruptly, blinking, and several people in the back of the room laughed aloud, though of course they'd stopped and were working on their equations as innocently as Harry by the time the professor turned around. Draco felt at his mussed hair, and his flushed cheeks, and blushed, further making him look ruffled.

"I expect you for detention tomorrow at seven-o'clock, Mr. Malfoy," said Vector sternly. "Ten points from Slytherin." She turned and stalked away with massive dignity, to try to find people who were not so innocent as all that.

Millicent, sitting behind Draco, groaned under her breath. Harry knew why. They were in a close race for the House Cup with Hufflepuff, and the loss of ten points might be enough to let it slip through their fingers.

Draco slid a furious glare at her, then glanced sideways at Harry, face turning thoughtful. Harry blinked, wondering if he was going to cast a jinx because Harry hadn't awakened him.

Instead, Draco just smiled, slightly, and then turned back to his equations, and Harry finally realized that Draco had meant it when he said that he wanted Harry to feel normal, and that he wouldn't scold him for those emotions.

It took a long time, and the presence of Professor Vector sweeping past, before Harry could look innocent again. He was tasting joy too strongly and sweetly.

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Sunset came.

Draco knew when it happened, even if no one else in the castle did. He had been born at the exact moment of sunset, as his mother had told him over and over again. So his magic coalesced and came together, carving the final pathways, when the exact seventeenth anniversary of his birthday rolled along.

And that was as dinner was served, with the red and orange light streaming over the chattering students.

Draco felt it beginning to build. Strands of magic coiled and drifted in through his ears and his mind, as though they had been floating about loose in the Great Hall and were attracted to him. In reality, he knew, this was all his own power, tugged away from the usual parts of his body where it resided. It slid into his chest, and then lower, pooling in his solar plexus. It was pleasant and unpleasant at the same time, as though he had eaten too large and too good a meal and was now struggling to contain the fullness.

He bent over the table, and felt Harry rubbing comforting circles on his back. As if jolted into life by that, other magic reached to him from outside and hummed in his ears. He could feel his connections to the wards of Malfoy Manor and other Malfoy properties, which were usually dormant unless he specifically called on them.

"Step back now, Harry," he did manage to gasp, when it felt as if he were about to grow wings.

Harry did, just as a soundless burst of light and heat flared around Draco.

For the first time in his life, all his magic was available to him at once. Draco gasped and shook his head, and reveled in the feeling of it, power piled on power. No, it was not as much as someone like Harry or Snape or Henrietta Bulstrode possessed, but he was no slouch, and enough above average to content him. If someone challenged him to a duel, he could put up a stiff battle. He could defend his

properties; the wards would obey him, even against his father, thanks to the passing-on Lucius had done. His possession gift shone in his head like a star, and for the first time, Draco was absolutely certain it was a combination of Malfoy empathy and Black compulsion; he could feel the separate components of the magic like two hemispheres of a brain.

The glorious moment passed soon enough. Draco sighed in the wake of it. He could definitely see why most wizards chose to celebrate the seventeenth birthday as the legal coming of age.

“Congratulations, Draco,” Harry said loudly, and held out his hand. Draco managed to stand and clasp it with a firm shake.

The other Slytherins came over to welcome him then, and some of those students from other Houses who had already attained their proper age. Even Connor caught his eye and winked at him from the Gryffindor table, though it wouldn’t have been appropriate for him to talk to Draco unless he was an adult himself. Which he manifestly wasn’t, Draco thought smugly.

Snape raised his goblet in toast from the high table, though he looked pale and tired. The Headmistress and Professor Vector, as well as Professor Sinistra, whose Astronomy classes Draco continued to excel in, nodded to him.

He stretched once, and then settled himself back into place, smiling at Harry. “Imagine what your seventeenth birthday will be like,” he murmured.

Harry looked startled, and let Draco see it. That alone was precious. “I don’t think anything like this will happen,” he said doubtfully. “Jing-Xi has told me that Lord-level wizards are different most of the time anyway, and I’ve already come to my full magical power thanks to—everything. I think, if anything, that birthday will just confirm what I already know. Perhaps unfold my magic a bit more. I don’t think so.” He shook his head, and then looked across the room. “But I am interested in seeing what will happen to Connor.”

Draco shoved him. “I think I’ll be more powerful than he will.”

Harry rolled his eyes and turned to dig back into his meal. "I hope for my sake that you're equal. Then I might have some peace."

Draco ate some more of his own meal before he responded. The magic had swept through him, and changed him, but he no longer thought it had altered his mind. This normal day had just been something he wanted to have, and he had come up with the idea all on his own. That pleased him.

"Harry?"

"Hmmm?" Harry glanced over at him. Argutus cocked his head, too, though Draco knew he couldn't really understand the conversation; he did seem to recognize Harry's name when spoken.

"Sleep with me tonight?"

"Of course."

Draco shook his head. "I didn't mean it that way. I mean—just sleep. Lie in my arms, and relax together." He made an apologetic gesture meant to take in his back, his chest, the whole hollowed-out mess of him. "I don't think I'm in the mood for anything more vigorous."

Harry studied him in silence for a long moment. And then his face softened, and he gave Draco a smile that was so normal it made Draco want to crow in sheer delight.

"I'd like that," he said quietly. "Yes."

He turned back to his meal, and Draco turned back to his. Sometimes, he thought, the Light might have a good idea or two. They had certainly hit on one when they chose to adopt honesty as a standard.

His hand reached out, to find Harry's waiting for it. Their fingers intertwined, and that was, for now, quite enough.

Interlude: The Liberator's Eleventh Letter

June 5th, 1997

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

It's done. It's done, and there will be only a few moments between the time when I cast this letter into the wind and the time when I can leave this place for good and ever.

Well. I suppose it might not be for good and ever. I'll probably still see my parents at times. But I won't live here again, and that—and having my freedom at last—is really all that I need to content me.

I suppose it would be a bit strange to say that I consider you a friend, wouldn't it? But I do. Even though you haven't been able to reply except for a few lines in public speeches and that one botched raid (which I am still embarrassed at myself for causing, by the way), I do feel that I know you. You've been someone who listened to me, and there are few times in my life when that's happened. I seem to have become trapped into a larger cycle of not only not doing what I want, but believing that I'll never be able to do so. You've broken that for me, and I thank you.

This is—

In a short while, I'll be at the Ministry. In a moment, I'll Apparate. This is the culmination of so many months of waiting that I can hardly believe this day is finally here. End of spring, beginning of summer. Oh, in so many ways!

I can't wait to look into your face, Minister, and be able to tell you what it means to me, that my long imprisonment is ended at last. Thank you for giving me a sense of purpose and courage in these last few months.

I fly!

Yours,

The Liberator.

Intermission: In Readiness

He Apparated calmly to his Lord's side that night. He knew what the Dark Lord would say to him, every word planned out, every dance step smooth. He did not need to be fearful or worried any longer. The arrangements had been made.

He appeared in the Riddle house, but this was a room he had never seen before. After a few moments of gazing about him, Severus understood. He was in Voldemort's inner sanctum, an honor that only Bellatrix, among all the Death Eaters, had received before—and then not for any special merit, as he had, but simply because her mad loyalty was beyond question.

The walls were smooth and black, Transfigured into cool stone. Warming charms glittered here and there along the stone, though, brightening and then fading, and Severus understood their purpose—to provide a warm spot for Nagini, and the other snakes that his Lord had collected about him, to rest. The floor was smooth and raspy beneath his feet, paved with either scales or a material not far from it. The chair that stood in the middle of the room flowed into a twisting ramp halfway down the seat, to provide an easy resting place for either snake or man. Or someone like the Dark Lord, Severus thought as he went to one knee and bowed his head, who was both.

“Arise, my child.”

His Lord's vibrant voice made the walls shake. Severus stood again at once, feeling the deep thrill of pleasure within when his Lord spoke his name. Yes, he had expected it, as he had expected everything about this night, but it was still wonderful. Yes, wonderful was the word for it. His Lord was the one who had taught him to appreciate his first name again, and the man who called himself Severus now and had called himself Snape in the past had never been so grateful for it.

Voldemort stretched out a pale hand, and a shimmer of magic rose above it, growing. Severus stretched his own hands out, warming them before the shimmer as he would before a fire. His Lord had been drinking magic from Mudblood children and recalcitrant

purebloods. He was a wildfire, a roaring glow of strength that would draw support from every wizarding community across the world in the end. It could not help but be so. The magic filled Severus's senses, and he swayed a bit, drunk.

"You have many griefs, my child," the Dark Lord murmured, as Severus had known he would say.

"Yes, my Lord." His words glided around and around him like the whisper of newly hatched vipers.

"And not least of all is your grief against Albus Dumbledore."

"Yes, my Lord." Yess, yess, yess, hissed his words, as they vanished and died.

"You hate him for retaining the Marauders in school when he should have expelled them and sheltered you, because you were the one who had almost died."

"Yes, my Lord."

"You hate him for refusing to accept and shelter you when you spied against me. He insisted that you place your life in danger for him each day, and he had the arrogance to imagine that his precious Light had redeemed you, that you joined the Order of the Phoenix for him and not to survive."

"Yes, my Lord."

"You hate him for the insults and patronizing air he has inflicted on you since, including speaking your name when you never gave him permission to do so."

"Yes, my Lord."

"You hate him for continuing to favor the spawn of James Potter and the adult Marauders even now. You hate him because you know he mourns the deaths of James and Lily Potter in a way that he would never mourn for you, who gave so much to him and to his cause."

“Yes, my Lord.”

“My child, my dear one, my serpent, my Potions Master, my Severus...” Voldemort’s eyes flashed. The air all around Severus turned a dull and shimmering red, the color of old blood.

“I give the honor of the kill to you.”

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Severus slowly opened his eyes. He felt more relaxed and satisfied yet than he had from one of these dreams. It was almost enough to cause him to wonder if they might be erotic in nature, but no, he did not think so. They refreshed his mind as well as his body, instead of leaving him in a state of lethargy.

And if they brought up old hatreds, as well, and floated them in the surface of his mind—well, what could it hurt to imagine them? Albus was dead, and disgraced. Sirius Black was dead, James Potter in prison, the werewolf beyond his vengeance. He had made his peace with Peter Pettigrew. He might remember the wrongs of the past and use them to strengthen himself so long as he did not dwell on them.

He gazed on the shimmering potions in the cauldrons near the wall, and gave a slow, assessing nod to himself. Yes, they were ready whenever he wished to use them. Perhaps he could convince Harry to take the silver potion today.

Today. In readiness.

The thoughts seemed to slide through his mind like blasts of wind, leaving it fresh and clean and—ready.

He pulled on his robes, absently caressed his left forearm, and swept out of his office to begin the day.

Chapter Ninety-Three: Slytherin and Gryffindor

Harry rounded the corner cautiously. He relaxed when he saw Snape striding ahead of him, not yet returned to his office after dinner. He'd wanted to catch him before Snape could bury himself in essays and resent an interruption.

Once, you would have known that he wished to be interrupted. He was the one who wanted to see you, who didn't mind putting aside essays for a while if it meant that you and he would talk.

And it might still be that way, Harry answered the voice back determinedly, but they had a few rugs to shake out between them first.

"Sir?" he asked.

Snape froze ahead of him, and then swung around. Harry took a step back at the look on his face, and then realized it wasn't really angry, just still, as if he had caught Snape in the middle of a deep thought. And, of course, when he didn't have a specific emotion filling his face, Snape tended to look angry.

Harry forced welcome into his voice. "Sir, I was wondering if I could speak to you. I know that we didn't find anything in your memories about what might have caused that lapse last time, but this time I have my own Pensieve." He nodded to the one floating behind him. "It's spelled with that magic Draco invented, which lets someone put a memory into the Pensieve and share a mindset. I might be able to learn why you did what you did if I can wear the emotions and the perspective that you wore at that moment. Will you let me?"

Snape stood as if listening, head cocked to one side. Then he murmured, "I do want to know why that happened, Harry. However, I insist on one condition that I want fulfilled if we look into my memories."

Just one? I can do that easily enough. And I think I even know what it is. "All right," Harry agreed, happiness bursting in the center of his chest. "Is it that I call you Severus? I can do that."

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He awoke.

It was the name that did it, of course, the name Severus being the name of the secret part of him, the part that knew he was half-pureblood and different from the other children around him, the part that was intelligent and showed it and was taken advantage of for it, the part that hated Albus Dumbledore and Minerva and all the rest for daring to use his first name when he hadn't given them permission.

Severus was who he was, the man who served his Lord. Snape, also called sir, also called professor, was the mortal coil he shuffled on over that, the dry skin that would provide his anonymity as he glided through the halls of the school like a snake not yet ready to shed.

His Lord had told him to remember his name, to learn to take pride and pleasure in it again, and rejoice.

His Lord was right.

Severus knew what he had to do. His Lord had told him he would know when the time was right, and he did. He gazed at the Potter brat standing in front of him, messy black hair and James's hazel eyes, and he had the strongest urge to strike the boy down as he had his father. But no, that could not happen, not now. His Lord wanted the boy to torture and maim and harm and kill before the wizarding world's gaze. If Severus slew him here, in a deserted corridor away from prying eyes, there would always be rumors that he had escaped and lived on to provide a hope for the Light. Everyone must see him die.

But there was another whose presence was legend, and necessary to the fulfillment of the prophecy, but whom everyone would believe was dead without that kind of prompting. There was another Severus hated, whose kill the Dark Lord had promised to him in reward for being a faithful servant.

Albus.

The Potter brat had asked for private time alone together to practice Occlumency; so said the Pensieve floating behind him. Severus kept his voice soft and regretful. "Alas. I've just remembered that I must go to the Headmaster's office. An appointment to keep."

The boy looked at him with something like concern written on his face. "Is that another lapse, Severus?" he asked, and the name rolled deep into his head, awakening other memories, echoes, moments of being true to himself that he had not had in the last little while, or only widely-separated and scattered. Albus had cast a spell on him, he thought, to keep the part of himself that severed his Lord asleep. Well, he was awake now, and he would remember that spell, and if he felt the numbness returning with the name "sir" or "Snape" or "professor," he would make every effort to combat it.

"Another memory lapse?" Because of course the Potter brat was nosy, and would have thought that he noticed something wrong when Severus was himself and not the bitter Potions teacher who lived night and day next to the man he hated and could not even claim his revenge. He saw the boy nod. He softened his voice. He could be good with children if he wanted to be. He could act like anything if he wanted to. "It could be. I promise, we'll use the Pensieve when I return. For now, though, I want to hurry on. The appointment promises nothing good."

"McGonagall's going to yell at you, probably," said the boy, and gave him a rueful smile. "She does that."

Severus was quickly growing disgusted with what his sleeping self had done. Acting friendly around the Potter brat to dispel the idea that he was a spy had been wise; actually befriending him was not. But he would have to maintain the façade for a little longer, until he could recover the memories of what he had done when acting as Snape. And he would have to hold to the boy's strange fantasy that anyone other than Albus carried Hogwarts. Minerva! She will never have the chance to ascend to power. When Albus dies, the school will fall apart, and have to be closed.

Which was rather the reason that his Lord had agreed to let him kill Albus in the first place. He understood how much Severus wanted his

vengeance, how the hatred swam in his veins and beat in his heart and filled them to fullness, but he would never let such a major kill happen only for vengeance, or to honor a faithful servant. The Dark Lord knew what would follow in the wake of Dumbledore's passing, the despair that would spread like a miasma around the world. The Light would lose its leader, and so would the Order of the Phoenix, even if most of the wizarding world didn't know of the prophecy's existence.

"She does," he agreed with the Potter boy, which cost him nothing, and made a short bow. "In an hour, then."

Connor Potter nodded at him and turned away, the Pensieve floating behind him. Severus was a little surprised at the strength of the Levitation Charm around it, but of course Potter had trained behind wards a long way from the rest of the wizarding world, and was less than two months away from his seventeenth birthday—a birthday he would never see. He had had a chance to grow stronger in his magic.

Severus turned for his office.

A few moments later, he left it. Two vials, one full of purple potion and one silver, rode in his robe pocket. The third vial was open in his hand, and, gently, Severus coated the base of the dungeon corridors' walls with his green potion. Any Slytherins who served the Dark Lord, who had given their allegiance where it belonged, were already safely out of the school.

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Minerva was more than slightly surprised when the gargoyle leaped aside and her wards on the moving staircase informed her that Severus was on his way up. She had planned on spending an hour alone with some tea and the latest series of demands the school governors had sent around, which happened every year when they were feeling ignored. But Severus rarely visited her unless it was urgent. That meant a problem in Slytherin House, a matter for the Deputy Headmaster to discuss with the Headmistress, or, perhaps, a personal question, which might have to do with his memory lapses. It was not a problem with a recalcitrant student; gossip traveled fast in

Hogwarts, and Minerva had heard all the latest horror stories of Potions classes already.

She put her teacup gently aside, and nodded to Godric, who had appeared next to the desk. He usually offered suggestions about what to do with the school governors' parchments that Minerva might have adopted if she were also a shade and had no accountability to the living world. "Stay invisible, if you would," she said. "I think Severus may be talking about something important to him, near the center of his ego, and your presence would harm his openness."

Godric rolled his eyes to show what he thought of that, but faded back into the wall. Minerva sat upright as the expected knock sounded. "Come in!"

Severus strode in. After a glance at his face, Minerva revised her estimate. A problem in Slytherin House, with a student he does not particularly like. He would not have worn that expression of dark glee if he were coming to talk to her about the memory lapses. He would be defensive instead, resenting the necessity of the visit even as he made it, taut and prickly and snapping like a hedgehog.

"Please sit down, Severus," she said, and waved her wand to conjure up a second teacup. "Tea?"

"Please," he said, voice a tad deeper than usual, and took the chair in front of her desk. Minerva snorted to herself. Yes, a student he really does not like. He is never polite unless he has something to gain from it or he is so cheerful that he does not care about the effort it costs him.

The teacup appeared, and Minerva carefully conjured tea into it. She was trying to make less use of house elf services herself, in hope of slowly weaning Hogwarts from them altogether. That would take years, but a little practice never hurt. Besides, she was a mistress of Transfiguration. She should be able to make tea out of lint if she wanted to.

She felt a brief, blurring sensation, and thought she heard Severus cast a spell. But when she glanced up from the carefully-poured tea,

he still sat on the other side of the desk, with a small smile on his face. She slid his tea across to him and picked up her own, taking a sip.

The tea itself was warm, but ice seemed to reach out from it, spanning her mind with frozen bridges, spilling coldness through her lungs and her limbs. She sagged back against her chair, and felt her mind wander.

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Severus's heart beat as if it pumped excitement instead of blood. It had worked. The slight time-delaying charm, which was not a common spell even among the Death Eaters, had let him lean past Albus and slip the silver potion, the liquid Imperius, into his teacup. Now the Headmaster leaned back in his chair, his blue eyes unfocused, his mouth that had spoken the name "Severus" and driven him further into hatred hanging open.

"Now," said Severus softly, drawing out the second vial of potion from his robe pocket, the purple one, "you will do what I tell you."

"Yes," said Albus's voice, so breathy that it sounded like a woman's, like Minerva's. Severus snorted at the impossible thought. Next he would believe what the Potter brat told him, that Minerva was in charge of Hogwarts.

"What I wish of you," said Severus, holding out the vial, "is to drink this."

The purple potion smelled foul, as it was meant to, and was full of a dozen substances that made it one of the deadliest poisons ever to exist, as it was meant to be. Severus had worked on it for almost a year, from the moment he had begun to dream most intensely. He thought he had a right to be proud of it.

Albus reached out, accepted the vial, and tilted the poison down his throat without a blink.

Severus could not contain his triumphant laughter, and he saw no reason to do so. The wards on the Headmaster's office would prevent anyone else from hearing him, anyway.

"It will not kill you quickly," he told the Headmaster, the man who had caused him so much pain and so much strife. "It will give you such pain as you have never known. As you writhe in the chair, remember that you should have chosen the side of Slytherin for once in your deluded life. It's the fault of your golden Gryffindors that this happened. If you had, just once, ever offered a miserable child some comfort, then I would not have hated you so much."

Merlin, he could feel the hatred. It dripped through his veins like blackest swamp water, curdling and turning his blood brackish. The only comfort for it was watching Albus's body jerk in convulsions as he began to suffer the first wave of the potion's effects. A moment later, he began to scream hoarsely, weakly.

Severus nodded in satisfaction. His dreaming self had tried to give the silver potion to the Potter brat, and indeed, that had been his Lord's plan at one time. But it had gone awry, and it was unlikely now that Connor Potter would accept anything from Severus's hand without asking many inconvenient questions first. This was better. Turn the Headmaster's trust against him, and he would die.

He started to rise to his feet, and something cold went through him. Severus turned in alarm. The one thing he had not planned for was that a ghost would be here, Peeves or the Bloody Baron perhaps. The wards on the Headmaster's office were supposed to keep them out.

It was not a ghost that wheeled past him, but a shade. A Founder's shade, Godric Gryffindor. Severus hissed, his hatred for all Gryffindors running so high at that moment as to prompt him to reach for his wand.

But the shade dived through the floor, aiming, it seemed, in the direction of the dungeons. Severus let go of his wand, slowly. Perhaps the shades had gone senile with the amount of time they spent bound to the school. It was beyond him what help Godric

Gryffindor thought to find in Slytherin, especially now that the green potion would be working and most of them would be incapable of helping anyone.

Still. It was not good to linger here, even though he had wanted to watch Albus's death as the convulsions broke his ribs one by one, and other, worse things happened to him. With one final regretful glance towards the Headmaster's desk—Albus had fallen off his chair, and lay on the floor—he turned towards the top of the school and the final point his Lord had wanted him to make before Severus joined him.

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"What is that?"

Harry glanced up from his Transfiguration essay. He knew how to conjure chocolate; that did not mean he knew how to explain the theory behind it, and he was grateful for the distraction Argutus seemed intent on giving him. "What is what?"

"That." Argutus's tongue darted out, and he unwound most of his body from Harry's trunk, where he liked to stay. "Something is wrong. Look at my scales." He heaved his coils up towards Harry.

Harry stared. There was a blurry green image moving in the Omen snake's mirrored scales, something strange happening right at that moment. He didn't know what to make of it, though. The image looked like nothing so much as a picture of swamp gas or a cloud of foxfire.

"And there is a strange smell, too," Argutus added, darting his tongue out again and swaying back and forth.

Alarmed, Harry put down his quill. Draco was in the loo, letting him have unimpeded access to reach out with his magic. He found nothing wrong in the Slytherin common room. There were students dozing before the fire or doing homework, their magic at a low ebb this late in the evening. There was the old magic of the common room

door, dozing until it felt the tug of the password. There were the castle's wards. There was—

Harry's eyes flared open. Magic moving in the corridors. And when he lifted his head and squinted, he could see tiny tendrils of green floating near the ceiling, so faint that he would have missed them if not for Argutus's warning.

Abruptly, his throat grew tight. He tried to draw in air, and couldn't do it. Argutus asked him something in a worried voice, but Harry, his panic building, couldn't spare the necessary attention to translate the Parseltongue.

And then he heard somebody collapse in the loo.

Perhaps if he had been alone, the panic would have won. But with Draco in danger, his temper burst free, and with it his magic. Harry held his palms apart and shot his power out like a net, aiming straight for the foreign feel of the green magic, which was subtle as smoke and not as powerful as a spell. A potion, probably. Harry grabbed every single bit of it he could find, not trying to swallow it, because he didn't know what the effect would be, but churning the air and using wind to crowd the potion fumes together into one deserted corridor and away from their probable victims.

His own throat released, and he took in air with a trembling gasp. Then he stood and staggered towards the loo, Argutus coming after him and demanding over and over again, in a voice that made him sound very young, to know what was going on.

He found Draco blue in the face, but when he half-collapsed next to his partner, Draco's chest was still moving. Harry leaned down and huffed air into him anyway, making sure it was clean. Draco coughed and sat up. His eyes were glassy, but he was obviously alive, and his magic flared up in him brightly to Harry's extended senses.

"What happened?" Draco whispered.

"Magic from a potion, I think," said Harry grimly, and then turned his attention to containing the green fumes. His power raced probing

through the dungeons, taking the form of small whirlwinds and shying from interaction with Hogwarts's wards, but found no more fumes above a certain level of the stairs. Harry clenched his hands in wordless thanks. The potion had been meant as a trap for the Slytherins, then, and though eventually it would have risen to infect the whole castle, Harry had managed to stop it before it got out of the dungeons. He herded the excess green fumes into the side corridor with his whirlwinds, and contained them behind a powerful ward.

"And the others?" Draco had given him a once-over, and was now moving towards their bedroom door.

Harry followed him swiftly. He heard coughing and sleepy exclamations of protest in the Slytherin common room, but everyone he looked at was alive. They would have to check the bedrooms, though.

Harry felt anger building in him. What was this? A prank? Even if it was only meant to send us to sleep, asphyxiation is no laughing matter. If I find out the Weasley twins had a hand in this, or the Gryffindors did and Connor knew about it—

A hand snatched at him, half-solid and half not. Harry staggered, then turned to catch his breath. Perhaps this had been Peeves' work, and he could confront the poltergeist now. Harry was in a foul mood, enough to rend the ghost apart with his magic.

Instead, he saw Godric Gryffindor, the shade of the Founder bound to an anchor-stone in the school's foundations, hovering anxiously next to him. "You must come!" he insisted. "Minerva's been poisoned by your Head of House, and none of us know enough about potions to counteract it."

Harry stared at him for a long moment. He wanted to protest, to say that Snape would never do anything like that, but he remembered the memory lapses, and he remembered the silver potion held in his hand the day before yesterday when Connor intervened, and he remembered his feeling that the green fumes had come from a potion—

His heart squeezed like a fist breaking an egg.

Please. No. Do not say he has served Voldemort all this time. No.

He rejected that notion wildly. But he also didn't disbelieve Godric, that McGonagall had been poisoned, and whether it was Snape or someone Polyjuiced to look like him, she needed help.

"I'm coming," he promised, and began to run. He heard Draco shout, and then, apparently giving up on shouting, pound right behind him. Godric swooped next to him like an anxious owl. People called questions as he ran through the common room, but Harry did not care.

"What did the potion look like?" he demanded of Godric as they came out into the dungeon corridors.

"Purple," said Godric, unhelpfully. "It smelled foul."

I know—Snape had a purple poison, one that he was playing with while we were still in the Sanctuary—

But again Harry cut himself off from the line of thought that would make him scream if Snape was a traitor. What was important was that he save the Headmistress's life. He did not think there was an antidote to Snape's new poison—certainly he'd never seen Snape brew one—and so he would have to fight it with another means, the only one that worked on all poisons. He held out a hand in the direction of the Potions store cupboard and threw all his magic into the spell he performed next.

"Accio bezoar!"

He heard doors bang and wood tear and stone shred as the bezoar soared towards him. He snatched it out of the air and silently promised Snape he would replace the broken cupboards and smashed potions later.

If there is a later. If he has not betrayed us all.

They ran, then, or at least Harry and Draco ran, with Godric floating beside them. Harry's thoughts rose and fell in waves with his feet even as they ascended the stairs out of the dungeon, even as the gargoyle moved aside for them, even as they leaped up the moving staircase to the Headmistress's office two steps at a time. When he lifted his foot, he thought of Snape, and what his memory lapses meant, and whether he had poisoned McGonagall of his own free will or not; when his foot fell he thought of Draco, stubbornly keeping up with him, and how he could convince him to stay behind and out of danger when Harry went to confront Snape.

Did he lay down that green potion along the corridors for me? Did he mean to insure that I wouldn't be in any position to help McGonagall by the time she started to die?

"Here, here, here!" Godric blew through the door to the office, forgetting for a moment that Harry and Draco were solid and would need to open it.

"Go warn the other professors," Harry commanded the Founder's shade, knocking the door open with a blast of his shoulder and his magic, both. "They'll need to know what happened, and that any of them are in danger if they meet Snape. Besides, there's nothing you can do here."

"I'll go," said Rowena Ravenclaw, stepping around the desk. She had been beside McGonagall, Harry deduced, and hurried towards her. "Since Godric is too worried to concentrate, and Helga is already raising her House." She stretched her arms over her head and dived into the floor like a fish into water.

McGonagall looked horrible. Already her robe was soaked with blood, and Harry thought she had broken ribs from the convulsions. Her eyes were glassy, and she gasped and choked, and her face had broken out into enormous, pus-dripping blisters. Harry was glad again for Lily's training in that moment, which had enabled him to see worse sights and survive them.

He fell to his knees beside her, pried open her jaw, and nearly lost a finger to her teeth as it snapped shut again. He growled, and his

magic spread into his hand, lending him the strength to hold her mouth still as he plunged the bezoar down her throat.

He felt the moment when the stone's power counteracted the poison as a start and stutter of steps. Suddenly the purple potion had to hesitate, and flow backward, reluctantly leaving McGonagall's limbs and torso and blood as the waves of healing spread outward from the lodged bezoar. Harry kept his eyes fastened to the fluttering of the pulse in the Headmistress's throat, and saw it slow, then begin to beat strongly once more. The bezoar had won the battle. Harry had to close his eyes and let out a deep breath, then. He had not been sure it would. If any Potions Master could brew a poison strong enough to resist the most powerful magical remedy, it would be Snape.

If he brewed it. If that was him. If he's a traitor.

And now there was no healing to be done, nothing that stood between Harry and finding out exactly what the fuck had happened to Snape.

He sat back, and nodded to Godric. "Fetch Madam Pomfrey. She'll live, but she needs care for her ribs, and for her heart." He remembered Madam Pomfrey arguing with McGonagall once about having a weak heart. The poison would probably have attacked that, seeking to exploit any weakness in its victim's body.

Godric nodded once, and vanished. Harry closed his eyes and reached out, seeking the familiar feeling of Snape's magic. He knew him, he could sense him, he knew him among all the other different, existing blazes of the students' and professors' magic—

Yes, he knew him. And he knew where Snape was, he could feel it, and there wasn't any reason for him to be there at this time of night. Harry swallowed, and stood.

Draco was there, catching his shoulders, staring into his eyes. "Wherever you're going, I'm coming with you," he said.

Harry didn't have time to argue about it right now. If worst came to worst, he would shut Draco out of the confrontation with Snape so that he couldn't be used as a hostage, but he didn't even know that this was Snape, yet.

If the world loves me at all, if fate is not entirely cruel, it will not be.

So Harry merely gave a sharp nod, and then turned, speeding towards the feeling of Snape's magic, speeding towards the Astronomy Tower.

Chapter Ninety-Four: Triple-Edged Blade: First Cut

Indigena wished she could see, wished she could hear. Her Lord lay motionless in a corner of his throne room, and reached out with his mind to cause havoc and sow destruction in the minds of his enemies. He was moving, at last, and Indigena would have liked to be able to share his vision as his plans began to bear fruit.

But she had her own task, and she was glad of that, too, glad in a different way. She would finally be free of the enforced stillness that had enveloped her. Reading books, crouching in burrows, using parchment as a weapon—it had all taken too long for one part of her soul, despite her understanding that they could have not moved earlier.

She spent one more moment gazing at her dreaming Lord, then closed her eyes and Apparated.

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Severus stood on top of the Astronomy Tower. He had finished enlarging the Dark Mark so that it hung over the school as a malignant, glittering thing. No one in Hogsmeade would miss it, and it might even be visible across the whole of Scotland.

Idly, Severus wondered if Muggles would see it. Then he snorted. Better for them if they do. It will help them prepare for the coming of their new Lord.

The night was full of green fire, outside him and inside him. He had killed one man who had been the target of his wrath and hatred for more than two decades, but there were others. His Lord had promised him the werewolf, had promised him Peter Pettigrew. His Lord was determined to punish the Light for daring to oppose him, and in particular those people who had surrounded and loved Harry Potter and pinned their hopes on him, but hadn't had the sense to give up when he was killed. Lupin and Pettigrew had both loved Harry. They were among the victims whose torture the Dark Lord would draw out, though not as long as Connor Potter's.

Severus stroked his wand, and smiled, while the green light of the Dark Mark traveled over him like the light of shooting stars. That silver potion I invented to poison werewolves would be a good start for Lupin. But I will need something more than that. I wonder if I might find a spell that mimics the full moon, and put myself in control of his transformation? True, none of the ones invented thus far are reliable, but I could create one that was. Or a potion—

“Snape!”

The sound of the hated name made him swing, snarling. The Potter brat was just coming out of the top turn of the staircase, the green light catching red highlights in his dark hair, his eyes wide and staring. He halted with one foot still on the staircase, and gazed at him with a face full of outrage and betrayal.

Severus laughed. “What is it, Potter?” he asked. “Disappointed to know my true allegiance?” He felt the glee in him growing. His Lord would not mind if he taunted the boy, or even maimed him, so long as the maiming did not make the torture Voldemort had planned impossible. “Sad to learn the true identity of the man who killed your Headmaster, who killed your parents, who betrayed and killed your elder brother, after so long?” He cast a lazy curse at the boy, one that would slap him back and cause him only a little less pain than the words could—a weak curse, actually, but one that the boy would have needed trained power, not merely strength, to block.

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Harry was close enough to see Snape’s eyes.

Close enough to see the glint of red in them, to see the way they shone with the light of the Dark Mark, to see their darkness tainted by surging malevolence and hatred.

Voldemort has done this to him. Voldemort is in possession of him.

And when Snape turned towards him at his call, Harry could see his left sleeve swing back from the Dark Mark, and he fought the temptation to close his eyes and be sick all over the stones.

The Dark Mark. It hurt him, sometimes, in the Sanctuary. Was Voldemort in his head, trying to control his dreams, even then?

Then Snape began to spout that nonsense about having killed the Headmaster, and his parents, and his elder brother, and Harry could only stare at him in astonishment. He thinks I'm Connor. Whatever delusion Voldemort's put him into, it's deep.

A curse came flying towards him. Harry called up a wandless Protego without even thinking and deflected it off to the side. He was still studying Snape, still thinking. It's as though Voldemort's put him into another reality. I know the Sanctuary dreams allowed him to relive the past, and after a certain point in time he stopped remembering them. Perhaps that was when Voldemort's dreams began. And no wonder we couldn't find anything with the Pensive and Legilimency, if he buried himself that deep. And used the connection through the Dark Mark, too. That's probably how he got around the hole in his magical core. If he sends the magic through pieces of his power lodged in other bodies, he's not pulling it into the center of his body where it can drain out again. He makes the Death Eaters into other bodies for him, hands and feet.

Snape made a low noise. Harry glanced up and met his eyes, and saw confusion peering through the tangled hatred.

And conviction, born perhaps of hope, born perhaps of delusion of his own, came to him as on the wings of a storm.

I can still win him back. Break his delusion, force him to see me, and I may be able to break Voldemort's control.

But it will be delicate. No one can interrupt.

Harry raised wards on the staircase behind him, a wall of solid power that no one would be able to pass or break. He heard Draco's cry, and the impact of a fist on what sounded like wood. Harry didn't glance behind him. He took a step forward, eyes fastened on Snape's face.

“Sir,” he said.

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Severus did not understand. The Potter brat was not that powerful. He knew he was not that powerful. The prophecy said he could not be. Someone stronger was supposed to stand at his shoulder, acting as a guide and a guardian. At one point that would have been Harry, at another Albus, but both of them were dead. Severus could not be facing such power, not here and not now.

Besides, the Potter brat would not have contented himself with deflecting his curse and then speaking to him in a low, soothing voice—calling him by title, even, as if he respected him! Connor Potter would scream and lunge with his wand out, cursing Severus for a filthy traitor all the way.

It was almost as if Harry stood there instead.

But it was not so, because it could not be so. Severus had been awake when he saw Harry die.

He thought.

Memories writhed and twisted in his head. For a moment, his dreaming self, the one called by “Snape” and “sir,” fought to awaken. For a moment, he did not know what was falsehood and what was reality.

But then he recalled his hatred. That was real, the one thing he had to cling to, while Harry, when alive, had tried to entice him to his side with false visions of love. Severus knew that no one could ever love him. No one had tried. His Lord cared for him in his own way, and so had his mother, who had taught him the truths of the world, but neither of them loved him.

Cling to the hatred. It is the only reality you know.

“I have no need to listen to you,” he told the Potter brat, the dark-haired, hazel-eyed, Potter brat, who stood before him. “I know you

are only trying to persuade me back to your side. Albus tried that, too, and it didn't work. I am not of the Light. The Light does not know hate the way I do."

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Hatred. That's it. That's what Voldemort's using to control him, I think. Hatred, and vengeance. He poisoned McGonagall because he thought she was Dumbledore.

And Harry knew how to fight hatred.

"Sir," he repeated softly. "I'm not trying to redeem you. You've done enough to redeem yourself. You chose to accept a child not your own—in fact, the son of one of your worst enemies—into your care. You turned your back on two masters, not just one, to support me, when you really believed in Dumbledore. You gave up, you thought, on any chance of my forgiving you because you believed it was the right thing to do, putting my parents and Dumbledore in prison. How many times have you put yourself in danger, nearly given your life, to save me? And you charged forward on Walpurgis, screaming, for my sake. You are Snape." He licked his lips, because the words that he was to speak next still did not come easily to him, and he might never have said them at all if not for the need to convince Snape by any method possible. "My father."

Snape made a wordless snarling sound. Harry saw him clutching his head.

"You are Potter," were the first clear words that emerged from that silent, rebounding struggle.

"I am not," Harry replied. "I gave up that name. I have not taken another." He thought of a final, possible method he might use to convince Snape, and raised his magic, surging, all around him. As he relaxed the barriers, the jungle came out, the brightness of spring and the heat of summer, the shadows of black jaguars and the coil of snakes. "Sir. Remember. Know me. Did my brother ever have magic like this? And you were one of those who taught me to appreciate it,

to acknowledge my own power. Please, sir. Remember. Come home. I love you.”

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The Potter brat—

Who says he is not the Potter brat.

Why would he choose this method of reaching out to Severus? It was strange. The words he spoke were strange. He had never considered Severus a father. Connor Potter was in Gryffindor. That had put a barrier between them if nothing else had. And for the first four years of school he was an annoying shadow of his brother, and for the last two he had been his Lord’s enemy. Severus did not know him, could never have known him the way he was speaking of. The appeal was bizarre. It had no chance of convincing him to stay.

Unless—unless—Harry—

No! I saw him die! I helped to kill him myself!

The world spun and rocked and bounded around him, and where he found the strength to say, “You are Potter,” in the first place, he could not have said. And then came the even stranger words about Severus teaching him to appreciate his magic, and the infuriating declaration that he loved Severus.

And then came the magic.

Magic like a tidal wave of spring, like the world that might contain love for a person like Severus but called Snape, magic of racing bodies and high pride and sustained courage. Slytherin magic, but magic not like the Dark Lord’s, though with twisting threads of familiarity buried in it, as if the Potter brat were a distorted, echoing mirror of the mighty reality.

What is reality?

The world spun, and words were confusing, and memory had abandoned him, but the magic was real. Severus swayed towards the magic as he had not towards even the roaring fire of his Lord's power. It touched some deeper part of him.

No! A lie!

He drew his wand and cast wildly in the direction of the magic, to remind himself that this was an enemy, to make the Potter brat defend himself and drop the strange façade that was working on Severus for no reason he knew. To make him stop the magic.

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Harry breathed deeply, his eyes focused on Snape. He could feel his mind streamlining itself, other concerns falling away, from what Draco would say when he dropped the wards to his hope that the green fumes had not hurt his Housemates. What he wanted now, what he wanted before he walked away from the Astronomy Tower, was very simple:

He wanted his father back.

"Remember," he whispered. "You can do it. Remember—"

And then a curse came at him, and Harry, who easily possessed the magic to swallow or deflect it, had a split second to decide what to do.

He dropped his defenses and let it through. A line of blood on his arm. It hurt, but it could have been worse. And when he lifted his head and saw dark eyes staring at him, he knew it had been wise. An enemy would never let someone as dangerous as Snape hurt him. His brother would never have done it. Even if his shield had failed, he would have raised it.

Harry took a deep breath and pulled all his magic back behind him, still retaining its presence so Snape could feel the familiarity, but showing himself unprotected. He held out his hands, palms up.

“You’re not him,” he said quietly. “You’re not the man Voldemort wanted you to be. You’re yourself, and I trust you.”

Snape’s wandless magic came out, surrounding him with a maelstrom of half-glimpsed eyes and snapping crab claws. He took a step forward, and his eyes were crazed. The air around him promised pain, promised death.

Harry held his gaze, and turned his head to bare his throat, but otherwise didn’t move. His vision blurred, so hard was his heart pounding, and Draco would have said he was insane. But Draco was not here. It was his choice, to take the risk, to trust.

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Contradictions ran around inside his head, smashing themselves together, sending shrapnel and bouncing stones down to rain on the unprotected meat of his mind.

Potter did not have magic like that. Harry was the only one who had magic like that.

Potters do not surrender. No son of James Potter would show himself that submissive. But a Slytherin trying to win out over a stronger opponent might. Harry would trust me like this.

This is—I saw him die! I saw him die! I saw him die!

My name is Severus!

His magic rose around him, responsive to his surging temper, ready to rend and rip apart if he could only decide what he wanted to rip apart.

“You’re yourself,” said the boy whose eyes were hazel, whose eyes were green, whose eyes were pits into endless blackness, “and I trust you.” He bowed his head and tilted his throat towards Severus.

His eyes flamed green in the light, green in the light of the Dark Mark, green in and of themselves, green as Lily Potter’s eyes.

And he rose and heaved himself forward from the back of his mind, Snape overtaking Severus, fighting madly against the dreams and the sweet pull of the hatred and the blaze in his left arm, the Dark Mark pulling on him to go back to his Lord, tugging him towards the vows he had sworn so long ago.

I am more than a Mark. I am more than a promise.

I am more than the people I hate.

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Harry saw the struggle begin in earnest. He knew it was probably similar to the struggle Sirius had waged in third year to take his body back from Voldemort for a few critical moments, but then he'd had Regulus, with his connection to them both, to tell him what was happening. This time, he would have no connection like that—

Unless he forged one.

He plunged forward and put his hands on either side of Snape's head, holding it still. It didn't seem to matter much. This battle was all internal. His dark eyes stared blankly forward.

Harry plunged forward again, using Legilimency to ride like a wind into the confused, conflicted mass of Snape's mind.

The silver Occlumency pools were bubbling, hung over by a dark miasma. Harry shivered. He recognized the miasma. It was Snape's loathing, his revenge impulse, the hook that Voldemort had used to get his hands on his soul. Harry knew how powerful that was. It had showed up even after Snape had supposedly loved him too much to let it take over, when he had fed James the insanity potion in fourth year. It was not an enemy to be lightly defeated.

But now the moment came when he had to choose between losing that impulse towards revenge and losing Harry. He'd never had to do that before. Even the moment of the insanity potion was not test enough, because Harry had still loved him and still testified at his trial.

Harry could do little but hover and watch in silence as Snape fought. It had to be his doing. If Harry tried to join in, he would be taking over Snape's free will, and he would never know for certain if perhaps Voldemort's hook remained in Snape's mind, only buried, not removed.

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He was Snape, the Potions Master who hated teaching, the Dark wizard who had given too much of his life to the cause of the Light, the father of an adopted son.

He was Severus, the scorned son of Eileen Prince, the favored servant of the Dark Lord, the father of potions that poisoned and killed.

Names for himself rolled through his head, adding weight to either side.

Hater of werewolves.

Pupil of Albus Dumbledore.

Deputy Headmaster.

Victim of the Marauders.

Death Eater.

Foe of James Potter.

Guardian of Harry James vates, by order of the Ministry.

Friend of Regulus.

Occlumens.

Changer of desires.

Survivor.

Slytherin.

The hatred pulled against the love, the revenge against the impulse to live life as he would, and Snape/Severus knew they were both strong in him, both too strong to simply be defeated. If he turned against either, then he would lose a part of himself. Voldemort would have him, or Harry would.

No. I will have myself.

And that decided him. Snape set his shoulder against Severus and pulled with all his might towards love.

He felt some of the webs in his mind rip and part, and immense pain filled his head as he tore open an Occlumency wound, not nearly as broad as those Harry had sustained in second year, but far deeper. He drained and bailed the foul water, forcing it from him, forbidding himself to care more about hatred of his enemies than he did about protecting Harry.

He turned his Legilimency on himself, as Harry had done once at Godric's Hollow, and he hacked and he burned and he tore and he screamed.

He had sacrificed part of himself, hurt himself so badly there was no telling right now how much he had lost. But the hatred had been Voldemort's hold on him, even more than the Dark Mark. All the dreams of himself as Severus, which he could now remember, had been focused on it, had encouraged it, had told him to seek vengeance. And as he rejected them, so he destroyed Voldemort's hold.

And then he was free, and he could feel Harry's hands gripping either side of his face, and he opened his eyes and stared straight at his son.

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Harry screamed like a hawk when he felt what Snape was doing. Yes, it hurt, yes, he had lost some parts of himself and would never be the same, but he was free. Harry lunged forward when his eyes opened and slid his arms around him, holding him fiercely. For the first time in his life, he thought he might know what it was like to have a father.

“Harry,” Snape whispered, and wrapped his arms tentatively around him.

Harry opened his mouth to answer, and then screamed as his scar exploded into pain. Blood drowned his eyes. He could feel Voldemort ripping open the old link between them, sinking claws into his forehead, laughing triumphantly, until all Harry could hear was the high, cold whirlwind of his joy.

Did you think that was the only knife I had prepared for you, my heir? Hardly. It was a distraction, and always meant to fail, though it would have been wonderful had it succeeded. Now see what you have failed to prevent in your concern with your father!

And visions slammed into him, an avalanche of despair.

Chapter Ninety-Five: Triple-Edged Blade: Second Cut

Rufus looked up with a small smile when he heard the knock on his door, at long last. “Come in, Hope,” he called.

The Auror poked her head through, trying and failing to hide a grin. “She’s here, Minister,” she said. “Do you want me to send her in?”

“She’s passed all the tests?” Rufus asked. Of course, he knew the Liberator must have, or Hope would not offer to let her come in. She would have been kept for an hour in a room alone, without anything to drink, so that she could not take Polyjuice, and she would have had the strongest anti-glamour charms the Ministry possessed cast on her. Even if she were the person who had written letters to the Minister that helped him and Harry win against Falco Parkinson, one could not take chances.

“Yes, sir,” said Hope. “And it’s—well, it seems like her. From what I read of her letters, she’s like this. She’s young, and so excited she’s fit to burst.”

Rufus laughed. “That sounds like the Liberator,” he agreed, and leaned back in his chair. His life was full of good news lately, it seemed. Harry had accepted the position of liaison between the packs and the Ministry, and the Wizengamot was falling in line, even those who had only voted for his measure because everyone else had voted for it. And now the Liberator had escaped from her parents’ home and was waiting just a few doors away. Rufus could not wait to meet her.

He glanced back at Percy, who sat at his desk behind his ward, and met a grin that matched his own. Percy had shared more of Rufus’s concerns about the Liberator with him than anyone else. It was only fair that he be present at the first meeting with her, too.

“Bring her in,” he told Hope.

The Auror nodded, and ducked out. Rufus shoved aside his paperwork and sat up, watching, almost holding his breath until the

two smiling Aurors waved the young woman in, shutting the door behind her. The wards lifted.

The Liberator was even younger than Rufus had expected her to be, with soft brown hair tinged with blonde that hung to her shoulders, and large brown eyes. She flushed under his scrutiny, to the roots of her hair, and ducked her head as if, freedom and all, she still knew how to be shy. Rufus reminded himself she hadn't been out of the house more than once a month before. That she had summoned the courage to make the great trek across England to the Ministry was a miracle.

"The Liberator, I presume?" he asked, rising to his feet.

"Yes, sir," she whispered.

"Might I know your name?" Rufus put his hand out.

She graced him with a dazzling smile, as if the request had restored her confidence. "Iris Raymonds, sir," she said, and then caught his hand in a firm grip with her left one.

Rufus started to reply, to speak a welcome and reassure Iris once again that she'd be safe in the Ministry, but a sharp sting interrupted him. He pulled his hand away from Iris, startled, and stared. A small wound was open near the base of his right wrist, seeping blood. From it, a numbness spread up his arm.

And Iris was changing.

Shadows of leaves and flowers appeared beneath her skin, flipping it over, rippling it until her features became those of a different woman entirely—a magic beyond Polyjuice, beyond any glamour Rufus had ever heard of. Streaks of green flooded her hair. She shook her head, and tendrils shone around her arms, dark eyes pooling and shining with power. Where Iris Raymonds had only seemed a witch of average magic, here stood a witch to be feared.

Rufus might not have known who she was even then, had he not read the descriptions Harry had passed him of Death Eaters.

"The Thorn Bitch," he whispered, still too caught off-guard to feel anything but stunned.

"Yes," said Indigena Yaxley simply. She watched him with a wistful smile, the only remaining trace of the Liberator, then nodded to his right wrist and held up her left arm so he could see the thorny rose coiled on the back of her hand. "My poison is in you now, Minister. You have approximately two minutes to live."

Rufus could not speak. There was no answer to this, no way to explain how his life had exploded or what it meant. Above all, he could not believe death was upon him. He had too much left to do.

Percy leaped up from behind his desk suddenly, a ringing battle cry starting from his throat. Indigena swung her head, then bowed it, and two thorns on long, slender vines lashed out from sheaths on her back.

One thorn took Percy through the throat. The other plunged into his chest, staking him like a vampire. When it pulled back out, something red and dripping came with it, something Rufus looked away from.

He knew, now, that the sluggishness gripping him was not the result of simple shock. Indigena's poison raced through him, biting and stinging with cold spikes, aiming for the heart. He tried to lift his wand to confront her, but his hand could not grip. He watched from a numb distance as his fingers opened and the wand fell to the floor.

Indigena withdrew her thorns from Percy's tattered body and sat on the edge of his desk, crossing one leg over another, watching him.

Rufus forced his mind to work, to think. He had been poisoned before, in his work as an Auror. There must be a way out of this. "How did you do it?" he whispered.

Indigena's eyebrows lifted. "Why, Minister," she said, "I'm a very, very good liar. I thought you would have figured that out already."

She was glad that this was done. It had been her plan, her idea, that she would help Harry against Falco Parkinson while making sure that the “help” did not put Harry too far ahead of her Lord. She had come up with the plan when she first realized that another Lord had entered the contest between Light and Dark. Take the Minister at the end of the game, and the blow struck would be a greater hindrance than the help of any minor information she could research about Falco and provide through letters. And the letters themselves, spaced out over time, never quite matching the information of any existing Light family, would encourage the Minister to trust her, and eliminate the difficulties that would exist in getting access to him.

She'd had time to write three letters and leave them with a contact at the Daily Prophet—Gina de Rousseau, a woman who did not know her, but would do nearly anything for money—with information to post them on the dates indicated. Given her Lord's preparations for battle at Hogwarts on Midsummer, Indigena could not have been entirely sure that she would survive the fight, or have time to write the letters if she was running or wounded. And that had been a wise precaution, considering what Hawthorn Parkinson had done to her.

She had altered the plan a little bit in the last stages, when she saw a chance to coax Scrimgeour into acting against Cupressus Apollonis and losing himself a Light ally. That had been an outside chance, though, a risk. She was glad it had worked.

Glad and not glad at the same time, she thought, staring at the Minister. I did not want to kill you. But you would never have taken the Mark, sir, my friend.

She gave a final glance at Percy Weasley as she stood and pulled a leaf out of her pocket. She had not wanted to kill him, either; his death had never been meant. But since he was in the office with Scrimgeour, he had needed to die.

She placed the leaf on the ground and carefully Transfigured it, until a model of the body she wore as Iris Raymonds lay on the floor of the office. She stabbed a hole through the body's throat when the Transfiguration was done. She had no intention of hiding that this was

the work of the Thorn Bitch, but she also had no intention of revealing her disguise if she could help it, the disguise superior to Polyjuice and glamours of every kind. It might come in useful later with people who were not the Ministry's Aurors.

Her own wand had rested safe in her pocket, wrapped with yew leaves, the same way Indigena had smuggled it in when she attended the Potters' trial. That did let her leave Iris's wand with the body. She parted from it with only a little twinge. Her own wand and her plants were dearer to her than a wand she rarely used.

Then she turned and lashed up with her plants towards the ceiling. She would leave the Ministry the same way she had once entered Tullianum, digging up through solid stone.

While she moved, she cast the Dark Mark, and it rose and streamed through the ceiling, to hang over the Ministry and mark the sign of a Death Eater kill. The passing of the Minister would send the wizarding world into chaos. Indigena had just upended everything rather neatly, and she smiled at the thought of the excitement to come, though she had killed two men she did not want to kill.

She had other errands in the meanwhile. First, she was to go to a certain orphanage in Muggle London and fetch out the wand of Rowena Ravenclaw, a Horcrux of her Lord. Voldemort had decided that the orphanage was not a secure holding place for it. When Indigena had it, she would Apparate back to Thornhall and bury it in her garden.

And then she had—something yet again to do. She might have feared to do it, but Harry was busy at the moment, thanks to her Lord. Indigena knew he could not interfere.

Up rose the Dark Mark, carrying its message of death and doom, and on Indigena climbed, steadily, her vines ripping out the stones in front of her, cocooned in the power of green and growing things, bringing her back to the evening light.

Chapter Ninety-Six: Triple-Edged Blade: Third Cut

It came on him as a sudden swelling tide would, black and littered with the wrecks of ships. It struck through the Dark Mark on his left arm, and it overwhelmed his mind like a sped-up spider's web of frost crawling across rocks.

Lucius stumbled, clutching at his left forearm, gasping, trying to find himself in the sea of emotions.

The foreign presence in his mind cut through his feeble efforts like a blade of ice. In that moment, Lucius bitterly wished he had learned Legilimency, or that the research on the Dark Mark he had conducted rather desultorily a few summers ago had yielded results. It had not.

He could hear the Dark Lord laughing, a sound he had not thought he would have to hear again. He bent his head and scrabbled blindly for his wand with his right hand. Some part of him thought that if he could cast a spell on the Dark Mark, then the call would stop coming through it, trying to make him leave the safety of the wards on the house and Apparate.

The blade had cut through the surface layers of his mind, though, and brought up something that Lucius himself had forgotten.

Dreams, dreams, dreams. Black and purple and deep reaching blue, they rolled down on him, and Lucius remembered how much he had hated Light wizards in the aftermath of his Lord's first fall. They had sneered at him as if they thought he should believe that what he had done as a Death Eater was wrong, and Lucius had longed to simply draw his wand and hex them.

And the Mudbloods who had propagated the Grand Unified Theory, and the disgusting idea that the Malfoy line had ever mingled its blood with the dust of the earth—

Thomas Rhangnara, the man he had yearned to control, to kill—

Against that welling tide of contempt, Lucius tried to raise his love for his wife and son, but he understood it as a feeble defense even as he

tried. He loved only two people in the whole world, and he had never believed in the supposed “power” of love as the Light wizards did. He could not shelter behind a shield he had no faith in.

The web tugged tight, and bound the part of him that objected and would rather stay in the house. Lucius rose to his feet, put his wand back in his pocket, and passed outside the wards, ready to Apparate.

A small part of him, still free, remembered a thought he’d had the first time he met Harry, when Draco brought him to Malfoy Manor for the Christmas holidays. He had felt a fierce gladness that he would get to face an enemy like Harry Potter across the battlefield before the end.

That part of him laughed, an ashy chuckle. It does seem as if you will get your wish after all.

And then he Apparated, and he was kneeling at his Lord’s side, head bowed to receive the touch of his hand, while the part of him that knew better watched from behind steel walls of hatred and Legilimency, caged by his own lack of love, helpless to act.

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And he was back in Azkaban, in the cold, filthy cell, surrounded by Dementors and the stink, not of human hatred, but of human indifference, which was worse, with the phoenix web shining in his mind, a beacon of what being friends with James and Lily Potter, and the protégé of Albus Dumbledore, had cost him.

“No!” Peter shouted out loud, and shoved the vision away.

But it returned, reinforced now by images from his dreams, sweeping up towards the surface of his mind like dolphins seeking the sun. He had lost twelve years of his life to that prison, and he would never regain the weight, the sunshine, the health that should have been his. He had broken free only to help someone else who was a sacrifice like himself, and was that right? Was that fair? Should he not hate his friends? Wasn’t he entitled to hate them, when they had done so much wrong to him?

Peter felt the burning of the Dark Mark, the call to Apparate, as a dim and distant thing. The hatred, and fighting the hatred, took much more of his attention.

The questions echoed in his head, asked by a voice he recognized now, as he had not recognized it when it appeared in his nightmares, taunting him.

Peter answered with a blast of love.

He had asked himself all these questions when he hid in the Forbidden Forest during Harry's third year, cold and hungry, watching vigilantly for an opportunity to get Harry alone and a weakness in the phoenix web that would let him tell the truth. He had had no choice but to ask them again in the Sanctuary, when Vera had peered at his soul and demanded answers from him in her own inimitable, subtle way. The answers had rung like bells in his head when he saw Remus walk away from Harry, once again following the strongest personality in his immediate vicinity, and when he had burned with the desire to punish him.

It was not a matter of forgiving his friends and Dumbledore for everything they had done. It was a matter of love being stronger than hatred, of caring more about the future than the past. He could not change the past. He could change himself.

He felt the hook lash out, swinging, trying to snag on a projection in his soul—

And he felt it fall back again, washed away by the fact that he had moved on into the future. The Dark Lord snarled in his ear as his shadow dissolved from Peter's mind like the nightmare it was.

Peter sat on the floor, breathing, for what seemed a very long time. He knew he should be moving—if this had happened to him, then something similar had probably happened to the other former Death Eaters—but all he could really think about was the fact that Voldemort had called him back to the Darkness, and he had resisted. He was free of that threat, should it ever come again.

Now, of course, he had more of an idea why he'd had those dreams, always focused on his enemies and his past, and more of an idea why he'd had an infected Dark Mark almost a year ago. That had been Voldemort sending part of himself ahead into the Marks, trying to sow his former followers' minds with seeds that would grow and force them to accept him.

Someone rammed a fist on his door. Peter stood, still blinking, and staggered over to it.

When he opened it, he found himself on the end of Regulus's wand, and then his stare, and then his embrace. Peter wheezed. He thought Regulus forgot most of the time that, physically, he was still a young man in his twenties, while Peter was in his late thirties now and not the best of health.

"Thank Merlin you escaped," Regulus whispered. "When I realized what was happening, when he tried to take me, I thought you would, but I couldn't be sure."

"How did you escape?" Peter asked.

Regulus pushed his sleeve back from his left forearm, showing the dark dog on his skin. "He has no claim on me any more," Regulus said quietly. "I belong to another mistress now." His shadow snapped its jaws in agreement.

Peter caught his breath. "And Severus?"

"I'm sad to say don't know." Regulus's eyes were shadowed. "Come with me to find out?"

Peter followed at his heels.

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The wolf in her welcomed it, of course. It panted and wagged its tail and thought that this was the greatest thing that had happened since the invention of blood.

Hawthorn fought. She had never known she could put so much effort into a single thing. The hook scraped through her, bringing up the images of her dreams where she had run on four feet after Lucius and Aurors and Gloriana Griffinsnest, and still she shoved them, forced them away, answered with Harry's image of the storm-clouded world and how one storm did not mean the end of that world.

Her wards twanged. Hoping Harry, or some other ally, had come to help her, Hawthorn forced herself onto her knees, tried to ignore the burning in her left arm, and stared blearily out the window.

Indigena Yaxley stood on the lawn.

The wolf in her howled. She wanted her daughter back.

Oh, Merlin, Pansy, Pansy ripped apart by this monstrous woman's plants, her neck broken, her beautiful daughter all destroyed and the most beautiful part of Hawthorn's life snuffed out like a rose by a frost—

The wolf leaped. The balance tilted. The hook caught, and Hawthorn knew a brief moment of despair so exquisite that she would have rejoiced to have caused it in an enemy.

Her hatred was stronger than her love, and it had cost her even as Harry had proclaimed in his speech last year, during the alliance meeting on the spring equinox, that vengeance would always cost wizards and witches.

"Come, sister," Indigena called, voice gentler than Hawthorn had believed it could be. "I have long wanted to discuss gardening techniques with you. And I know this is harder for you, and you will need a few days to settle in. Mindless chatter might be just the way to do so."

Hawthorn stood, grasped her wand, and passed out of the house. The wolf and the blood-crazed witch walked together in the front of her mind, the witch's fingers twined in the wolf's fur. The sane part of her cowered in the back of her mind and cried, sometimes in sobs,

sometimes in muffled lupine whines. She had the deadening feeling that it would not be sane for long.

Indigena laid a hand on her shoulder, her smile full of pity. Then she closed her eyes, and together they Apparated.

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It took less effort to take possession of Adalrico than it had almost anyone else. Adalrico knew that, understood the moment the hatred began inundating his soul, and he half-defiantly half-welcomed it.

He had a right to hate. Harry should have let him kill Pharos Starrise. The whelp had defied law, custom, tradition, honor, everything when he had told the Unspeakables to capture Adalrico. It was too much. It was—there were no words for what it was, and if he had killed Pharos, or at least performed a vengeance ritual of some kind on him, then Adalrico knew he could have healed his wounds.

Then he would not be subject to the call of Voldemort.

It had been a moment of sanity that made him call on Harry, a moment of desperation as he found himself plotting ways to actually use the Black Plague spores on Pharos in the Ministry. And then, by the time Harry had arrived, Adalrico had wanted to listen to the dreams. They were making him a bit clumsier, a bit less than Slytherin in his planning, but did that matter? He would have used them soon, and then been done with it, and Pharos too.

In a way, it was Harry's fault.

So the Dark Mark flared, and so he gave up the long struggle to raise his soul from the poisoned garden in which he found it. He was probably never meant to escape anyway, not if he had gone back this easily. And he had sworn the family oath with Harry. He could not act against Harry or his blood family anyway, not without bleeding to death.

So it would not be so bad.

Even as he knelt before the Dark Lord's throne, Adalrico did not know if the justifications he had woven came from pragmatism or despair.

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Indigena appeared among the other Death Eaters, Hawthorn Parkinson at her side, and shook her head as she watched them. This was where her approval of her Lord's plan ran out. She did not like fighting beside traitors. They had no honor. They might pretend they had honor, that coming back to their Lord as they had done proved they had it, but nothing could make up for that first betrayal.

She gave a pitying look at Hawthorn as the werewolf knelt. She had not wanted to play this part, either, but her Lord had insisted. Hawthorn had resisted hardest of all of them, because she was used to fighting her wolf, a creature of savagery and hatred. It was no coincidence that, when her Lord had chosen to test his control over Evan Rosier and make him lure Connor Potter to a specific place, he had chosen Hawthorn's garden to be that specific place. Indigena had had three purposes there: to make sure that Evan did as he was supposed to, to make sure that Connor Potter did not die before the punishment her Lord had planned for him, and to see if Hawthorn would react to her with hatred. When she had, the Dark Lord had known that he could use Indigena as a final lure to tip the other woman's balance, if worst came to worst and she resisted the dreams even to the end.

Glancing around the throne room, Indigena noticed the absence of Regulus Black, Peter Pettigrew, and, most surprising, Severus Snape. She frowned. Really! That particular traitor resisted the call of his own impulses towards revenge to stay by Harry's side? I suppose I am impressed, but I am more puzzled. I never thought he could do it, with as long as my Lord has been in his head, seeing through his eyes and making him dream to his will.

She paused when she saw a figure she had not expected standing there, and clenched her fists. Evan's black eyes stared at her, the eyes of a caught mad thing, snarling. She almost expected to see the foam of a rabid dog falling from his jaws.

“Relax, my thorn.”

Indigena slid to a knee with the others as Lord Voldemort rose from his bed, floating. When he was this close to so many Dark Marks, he could command the magic of their bearers. It circled through their bodies, the pieces of him they carried on their arms, and through his; when the hole in his magical core attempted to drain it off, it circled back to the former Death Eaters instead. He had been unwilling, mostly, to use Indigena this way, since she was with him willingly and he wanted her to use her magic for more important things. But these Death Eaters whom he was punishing for loving Harry and turning their backs on him made the perfect hands and feet.

“Evan has come to me like these others,” said Voldemort, settling into his throne, “and I have control of him.”

Glancing at Evan, Indigena was not so certain of that—as well control a thunderstorm—but she held her peace. It was true that Lord Voldemort would never have allowed anyone but her so close to his Horcrux cup unless he was assured they would not rebel.

“And now, my lord?” she asked.

“Now, my thorn,” said her Lord, his hand caressing her hair while the snake wound about his waist stared at her with red eyes, “you will go to the new allies we have agreed upon.”

Indigena sighed. She didn’t like this part of her Lord’s plan, either. She did not think the vampires would choose to serve Voldemort without asking too high a price. But she had sworn to be loyal, and honor held her still.

“And Harry?” she asked, glancing up.

Voldemort laughed, and the snake swayed.

“Dear Harry has seen all that happened,” Voldemort answered, “though only, of course, what I thought wise to show him. I rather fear that I have made my magical heir a bit upset.” The snake swayed faster and faster, dancing a mad pattern. “I rather fear that I have

made someone else who bears a scar, a brand, connected to me full of hatred.”

Indigena, who remembered reading the chapter “Brands and Scars” in the book *Odi et Amo* again and again, knew what that meant, and knew where her Lord was going when he closed his eyes and lashed his mind out and down another Legilimency connection. Before very much longer, if Harry’s hatred was strong enough, they might have their Lord’s heir standing at their sides.

And having felt the surge of Dark magic that destroyed Falco on Walpurgis Night, Indigena was fairly certain it was strong enough. Harry had a temper when he allowed himself to feel it.

Now, more than ever, she was sorry that she could not follow her Lord into the vision, and would simply have to wait patiently for the result.

Chapter Ninety-Seven: Having Seen That Love Hath An End

The vision flooded out of Harry again, leaving him shaken and drained. For long moments, he could only lie on the stones of the Astronomy Tower, blood soaking out from his forehead, Snape's hand shaking his shoulder, and try to absorb what he had seen.

When he knew—when he had realized that the Minister was dead and three of his allies would be forced to fight him again—then he screamed.

His magic burst out around him, phoenix wings gone dark, flaring with steel spikes and serrated edges. Harry heard the wind pick up, and knew the harmless whirlwinds he had raised to contain the green potion fumes in the dungeons were puny compared to the might building now. As if in response to the thought, thunder answered from overhead. His power was drawing a storm.

And why shouldn't it? Harry thought, his hands clenching beneath him so hard that he thought he felt a finger break. And why shouldn't it? I have a right to hate him. All he's done so far, and I thought I hated him for that. But I never knew what true loathing was until now.

The clouds above him swayed and drew together, and obscured the place where the moon would hang, were it not dark tonight. Harry lifted his head and cried out again. The wings beat, hard, very nearly throwing him forward and off the Tower.

Snape shook him again, and Harry could hear him speaking, but he could no more afford to pay attention to the words than he could have afforded to listen to Argutus's Parseltongue when he thought Draco was dying of the green potion. Snape was safe, and would not follow the others to Voldemort's side because he had defeated Voldemort in his own mind. But the others—

The others.

There were people living in pain and people dead right now, and all because they had tried to help Harry, or loved him. Voldemort might

have struck at Scrimgeour, because he was Minister, even if he had been Harry's enemy, but the others would have been safe.

Everything I touch, I taint.

The hatred built, curved, piled steps of darkness, half hatred of Voldemort and half hatred of himself. If it had been only one or the other, Harry thought he could have stopped it from building. But how was he supposed to resist this? No one he loved would ever be safe again. Harry had felt the Dark Lord's triumph. If he had had this planned for Scrimgeour and Percy, Hawthorn and Adalrico and Lucius and Snape, he would plan something else for Draco, for Snape now that his first plan had failed, for Connor, for McGonagall, for Regulus. Everything and everyone who loved Harry was in danger while he lived.

Unless he went to Voldemort now. Unless he destroyed him before he could take anyone else or make anyone else suffer.

The wings had firmed on his back, solid black shapes that channeled the wind. Harry stood and made his way towards the battlements, his mind set into one firm mold. He would find Voldemort. He did not know where he was and could not Apparate there, but he would follow the burning of his scar, which would act as a guide. He would find him and he would destroy him. He would cause the Dark Lord such pain as he had never known, until he told Harry where the Horcruxes were.

All of this had happened because he had not hated enough, not been angry enough, not been firm enough.

Harry pulled his magic into himself with a roiling crash. The ward on the stairs behind him disappeared. He would need the power it had contained when he faced Voldemort.

He leaped into the sky, and the wings caught and bore him as only a broom would have done before. Steadily, he turned west.

"Harry!"

He whirled around. Draco was on top of the Tower now, having broken through when the ward vanished. He had a hand outstretched, and his voice was harsh with something worse than rage, though his face was free of tears.

“Where are you going?”

Harry laughed. The storm laughed with him. His magic was everywhere around him, aching and hungry for the kill, wilder than the wolf that had come to him on Walpurgis Night. “I’m going to him, Draco. To kill him, as I should have done before it got this far.”

“Harry, no!” Draco leaned forward. “I forbid it.”

Harry arched an eyebrow, and the wings on his back twitched. “How exactly,” he asked, keeping his voice gentle, “do you think you can stop me?”

Draco took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

Harry was waiting for the familiar feeling of Draco’s possession gift in his mind, though. He caught it, and captured it, and threw it from his head. Draco gave a pained grunt and staggered back. He might have fallen and split his head on the stones, but Snape caught him. Distantly, Harry was glad of that.

He turned, ready to fly again, ready to give himself to the abyss of fury. His magic purred all around him, glad to be free. Other people kept telling Harry that he had to be the leader in this fight with Voldemort, that he had to set his magic free and use it. He should have listened to them before.

He noticed a small figure rising from the grounds to intercept him, and growled in annoyance. He did not have time for this.

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As he leaned into the wind, Connor had never been so glad that he had a Firebolt.

He'd spent time with the damn broom since Christmas. He'd mastered it. No one else could have taken the Firebolt off the ground and reached Harry as fast as this. Granted, Connor had had to sneak out of the school to the Quidditch Pitch first, because none of the prefects were minded to let the students leave their common rooms with a mad Snape running about, and that had taken some time. But when he heard, from gossip brought back by those same prefects, that Harry had last been seen heading upward, he had known he needed his broom.

And now this. The storm. His brother's magic, restless, whipping around Connor in the air.

Harry on black wings, just above him.

Connor didn't intend to fly away and leave him there. What kind of brother would he be if he did that?

Harry was turning towards him now, his eyes wide. Connor could see his lightning bolt scar welling with blood as real lightning began to flash around them, and the wind picked up. Connor ignored it all. He had played Quidditch in worse circumstances than this. He braced himself against the broom and scowled at Harry, wincing as he felt pain begin in his own scar. He didn't usually feel it—the last time he'd truly felt it had been when he spent months near Voldemort possessing Sirius's body—but if there was any evening when it would happen, it would be this one.

Voldemort was probably behind Snape's poisoning of the Headmistress somehow. Connor could see him attempting to harm Harry, because he had never known how to act around Harry. But harming McGonagall with a poison was simply clumsy. If Snape had wanted to kill the Headmistress, he would have done something subtler.

"What are you doing here?"

Harry's voice was so low and thunderous that it took Connor a moment to sort it out from the storm. Then he scowled harder,

because he could not believe that Harry would be that stupid. "Stopping you," he said simply.

"You can't," said Harry.

"Why not?" Connor countered. "I think we take turns being the stupid one. You're stupid right now. He's probably convinced you it's all your fault and you have to settle this on your own. That's what he convinced you of in third year, and second, too, though then you at least had Draco with you. So right now I'm the smart one. And I love you, Harry, and you are not going anywhere on your own."

Wind howled in his ear. Connor raised his eyebrows, asking his brother without words if he was supposed to be impressed.

"You cannot stop me," Harry repeated, his face twisted into a grimace. Connor thought that was four parts Voldemort and one part self-blame. However Voldemort was possessing him, it had to have roots in Harry's guilt and self-hatred, two of his strongest emotions. "My magic is stronger than yours."

"Yeah, it is," said Connor. "But you can't do this."

And he lashed his compulsion like a rope around Harry's mind. Fly back to the Tower this instant, and stop being an idiot.

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He hummed, did Lord Voldemort, he sang, because he had tapped into a part of his heir's mind that was his, and which lay deep in the boy, and which almost none of them knew about, though Harry had felt it stir in his head a time or two when he let his temper fly.

Their magic lay between them. So did the link, founded in the scar, and through that Lord Voldemort could feed hatred and whisper to that buried part to rise, to envelop and embrace Harry. Twice he had almost succumbed to it—once with his mother, and once with Lord Voldemort in the graveyard where he had lost his hand. Once the traitor and Lucius's brat had saved him, and once the necromancer had. But no one would get close enough to Harry to save him this

time. Harry would push them away, keep them safe, because he had already witnessed enough loss through the visions Lord Voldemort had given him.

It was perfect.

Which was why it rather annoyed him when he felt compulsion he hadn't put there striking through his heir's mind. He reached out, though it was slow and heavy and hard because the connection was so muted, and tried to force the boy riding the broomstick near Harry away. It was not his time yet. Oh, yes, Lord Voldemort knew what he would do with Connor Potter, but falling from his broom, or dying in a blast of his brother's magic, was too simple a death.

The boy simply snorted, and turned to face him. Lord Voldemort received a vision of his face, half-fueled by their mental connection and half through Harry's eyes, and saw utter disdain there.

"I'm a compeller, too," Connor Potter told him. "And compellers are immune to compulsion."

Which made him even more annoyed.

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Connor could feel intense pain in his head. The pain only bled into his anger. He was not about to give in to the bastard trying to take his brother away from him. He pulled on the rope he had fastened on Harry's mind.

And Harry screamed, and broke the leash, as any vates would be bound to do the moment he felt a compulsion placed on him.

Then the full might of his anger turned on Connor.

A wind came at him, one Connor knew would smash the Firebolt to kindling and himself to tiny bits of flesh. Of course, it had to catch him first, and he wheeled and steered out of its path.

Then a crosscurrent of winds tried to catch him. Connor tucked his knees close to his chest and sent the Firebolt spinning out from between them, then clamped his knees down again and dived from above Harry, making him start and shy, his black wings fluttering nervously. He wasn't used to them yet, while Connor knew everything about the broom under his hands and knees, how to make it sing.

"You're being an idiot, Harry," Connor called. "For Merlin's sake, you don't need to go alone. You always do, and look what the hell happens. You almost die of blood loss. Or you only succeed because someone repossesses his own body for a moment and Peter's there to throw the wand of the sacrifice to you. Going alone, by yourself, is stupid." He took a deep breath. That might make Harry pause and listen, but Connor knew he needed words to attack the self-loathing. "And Voldemort would be stalking someone else if you didn't exist, me or Neville. People would still suffer, and still die. Magical creatures won't be free if you go. We need you here, Harry. Too much to let you go. Come back, now." He extended a hand from his Firebolt, swinging in low over his brother, taking in his wide, devastated eyes, from which rage was beginning to falter and into which sense was beginning to come.

But with the sense came the blame, of course.

"But they died because they were connected to me," Harry whispered. "They died because I loved them."

Connor rolled his eyes. Oh, for Merlin's sake—

"Do you need a hug, Harry?" he asked.

That had the effect of making Harry stare at him in confusion, interrupting his self-pitying ramble. "What?"

"You need a hug," said Connor. "I think I'll give you one."

And, not giving himself time to think, he launched himself straight off the Firebolt, and towards Harry.

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Lord Voldemort was very, very, very annoyed. Deeply irritated. Displeased with life in general.

Harry's hatred had rolled away too easily, at the first minor challenge. That suggested it would not be as easy to snare his heir's mind and drag him to his side as Lord Voldemort had hoped.

And now he found Harry's focus changing completely, from killing him or blaming himself because he hadn't foreseen this to trying to catch his falling brother.

Lord Voldemort could admit when he was defeated. Besides, he had plans Harry had not seen, plans to punish those who loved him that could begin now. Those plans might be enough to gather Harry's hatred up so that he, Lord Hunter, Lord of the Dark, could make another try in the near future. He cut his ties to the anchor in Harry's mind.

He leaned back, and announced, "It seems that my heir will not be joining us this evening." His thorn's face fell. Lord Voldemort leaned forward and caressed her hair again. "But we will see him soon enough, I have no doubt."

It does not matter. I know the third.

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Connor was jumping from his broom, because he was mad, and Harry had to catch him before he could fall. He could not stand if someone else who loved him died this night.

Or ever.

He flared his serrated wings wide, so that they would not cut Connor, and then spread his arms. Then he flew a little backwards, because Connor's leap, brave, stupid thing that it was, had carried him in a wide arc over Harry's head.

He felt the breath leave him as his twin slammed into him, and scrabbled madly at his robes for a moment. Then Connor's arms curled around his neck, and his arms curled around Connor's back, and they hung there in the middle of the air together, panting, while Harry tried to feel some emotion that was not terror or self-pity or hatred of Voldemort or deep annoyance at his brother.

"Why did you do that?" Harry asked at last, because he had to know.

"To—get your mind off what you were thinking about," Connor panted. "To give you someone to protect. That's the only way to get you to stop thinking about the dead. Get you to start thinking about the living."

Harry's eyes closed, and he began to soothe the storm, to draw his power back into him, and make this a calm, dark night in June, the way it had begun.

A calm, dark night filled with so much death.

Harry shuddered. He had learned a number of nasty things about himself in a very short time. He could not protect everyone in this war. He was capable of feeling enough mindless hatred towards Voldemort to want to kill him, after years in which he had never hated anyone that way. He could disregard the living people around him in his concern over the imprisoned or the dead. He still tended to act alone first, if he had a chance at all, and on impulse.

And the moment he felt enough hatred—and Harry knew it would only increase, with Voldemort attacking more people he loved and attacking innocents—Voldemort could try to snatch him again. The curse scar was a vulnerability as great as the Dark Mark of any Death Eater.

"I just want it to be over," he whispered into Connor's ear, feeling a great wave of weariness roll over him.

"You and everyone else," Connor responded, his voice hard. "That's why you can't charge off on a whim, Harry. We need you to lead this war, to fight it, to help destroy Horcruxes, to free magical species—for

so much.” His arms squeezed hard, again. “So you had better stay right here, or I’ll chase you down and compel you to stop being an idiot again.”

“If something does happen to me—“

“We’re doomed,” Connor said, without preamble. “So make some attempt to stay alive, Harry, yes? And don’t you dare say anything about the prophecy choosing me for the third round,” he added with a savagery Harry had never heard from him, when he opened his mouth. “It might, it might not, but that doesn’t excuse the fact that there are many things only you can do. You’re going to outlive this war and make the world a better place, Harry. Show Voldemort that he’s only a tiny cloud in the sky of your life.”

Harry said nothing, but began to fly towards the Astronomy Tower again, with Connor’s words working slowly inside him.

So that’s what other people mean when they say my life is more important than anyone else’s. I—understand, now. Both emotionally and intellectually.

I’m the Light’s greatest vulnerability, because Voldemort is fighting this war to hurt me. But I’ll just have to continue on with being its greatest weapon, as well. I have to do this. There really is no other way. And I can’t give in to hatred, or the impulse to hurt him independent of allies.

He came in low, set Connor down on the battlements, and landed softly, dissolving the wings back into himself. Then he lowered his head, and relaxed into a simultaneous pair of embraces, from Draco and Snape. He could hear voices on the stairs. Peter and Regulus, it sounded like. He knew they had not been taken, or Voldemort would have shown him that, too, but it was nice to receive confirmation they were there, and free, and alive.

He lifted his head to the skies, and stared at the place where the moon should have been, at the clouds rushing over the stars.

He felt Voldemort's presence passing through his scar like a second, foul breath, beating heart of the beast.

Harry bared his teeth. To the death, then, and the third round of the prophecy. Come on, you bastard. I'm ready.

When he raised his magic this time, he did it in the shape of a pair of phoenix's wings, and sent his voice to follow it, living reminder of immortality and greatest Light, a warning to Voldemort about what was to come, mourning for the dead, and embrace of the future and its endless sacrifices.

The End.

As I said, the new story starts on either Tuesday or Wednesday. I hope you'll enjoy reading along as much as I enjoyed writing it.